

SEPTEMBER 1954

AMAZING STORIES

VOL. 28 NO. 4

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NO STAR IS SAFE

By P. F. COSTELLO



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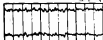
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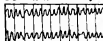
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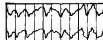
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SEPT. 1954
VOLUME 28 NUMBER 4

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New York 17, New York

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THE MAN WHO UNBELIEVED

BY ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

The door you banged into and got a black eye; if you had "unbelieved," it wouldn't have been there. So try it again and "unbelieve" real hard. Of course, you may get another black eye but think how proud you'll be if it works.

MEN on the wrong side of the law feared Detective-Lieutenant John Harshbarger exceedingly, claiming that he had a third ear by which he heard words they did not say with their mouths but only thought in their minds. They feared him most when he listened in silence.

Allowing Kelso, his assistant, to do the talking, Harshbarger was silent now. At this point, he was feeling his way and was trying to sense what had actually happened here in this apartment instead of what Erth, the occupant, said had happened. Vaguely he noted an odor here, a musty smell so thin he could not be certain he sensed it, an animal effluvium. From where he was standing he could see the lab men

checking the bedroom for signs of a struggle or for the tell-tale marks that would reveal where blood had been sponged up. So far as he could tell, they were not finding anything. Harshbarger noted that the bird cage was empty and tried to think what that meant, if it meant anything. Meanwhile he listened to Kelso ask questions, and waited for the right moment to begin his own attack. Something was wrong here. He did not know what, but both his duty and his nature urged him to find out.

"Was she all right when you went to bed?" Kelso asked.

"Sure," Erth answered. Erth was short and powerfully built, but unlike most strong men, his face lacked



Half the steam shovel had vanished from sight.

color and seemed to be more of a mask than a face. At this moment, he seemed dazed. Harshbarger had the impression that Erth was answering Kelso's questions with only a part of his mind while another part was busy doing something else. Yet the man did not seem to be deliberately evading or attempting to cover.

"Tell us again what happened," Kelso said.

Erth spread powerful hands in a helpless gesture. "It's like I said before, when I woke up, she was gone. At first, I thought she was maybe in the bathroom. I dozed off again, since it is my day off. I didn't wake up until about ten o'clock. It was then that I realized something was wrong. When I couldn't find her, well, I guess I went into a kind of a panic, and I called the Bureau of Missing Persons. Frankly, I didn't anticipate that half the department would call on me." Indignation crept into his voice.

"It's routine," Kelso said soothingly. "When anybody is reported missing, we always check all the angles, just to make sure that—uh—well, just to make sure." Kelso's voice faltered, then became crisp again. "Then the last time you saw your wife alive

was last night when both of you got into bed?"

"Yes," Erth said.

Harshbarger spoke for the first time. "Did you see her dead after that?"

Erth looked startled. The eyes that he turned toward the lieutenant had sudden shock in them. The pupils widened and the little muscles at the corners of the eyes grew taut with sudden tension. Watching, Harshbarger had the impression that this man had suddenly become aware of something that up until this moment he had not known. A change came over him. Putting the change into words was difficult but it seemed as if suddenly all of Erth's mind was present and very much alert, sensing threat. And, impossible as this was, Harshbarger had the impression that this was the first time that the thought that his wife might be dead had occurred to Erth.

The man blinked. A tremor passed across his face. The pupils of the eyes stopped widening and shrank to pin holes. All tensions went away from his face and it became blank. "No, sir. I did not see her dead." Erth's voice was calm, almost detached. Deep down inside, he seemed

pleased, thrilled, elated, as if he had made some tremendous discovery.

"Didn't you think it was peculiar when she wasn't in the apartment?"

"At first, I didn't think anything."

"Was your mind fogged?"

"Sort of."

"Is it fogged now?"

"It doesn't seem to be."

"What did you do when you first discovered she was missing?"

"I went next door and asked the neighbors if they had seen her."

"They hadn't?"

"No."

"Did she have any boy friends?" Harshbarger snapped.

If the question, and the implications back of it, meant anything to Erth his face did not reveal the fact. "None that I know about."

Harshbarger hit harder, looking for a possible motive for what he sensed was here. "Do you know what a cuckold is?"

"No. I don't believe I do."

"It's a man whose wife is two-timing him."

"I see." Erth shrugged and meant it. "Rita wasn't two-timing me."

"But she just walks out of your apartment sometime

during the night and you can't advance a single reason for her disappearance!"

"I don't know that she *walked* out—"

"Do you think she flew?"

"No. All I'm saying is that I don't know how she got out."

"Um," Harshbarger said. "Are any of her clothes missing?"

"I don't know. I haven't had time to look."

"Well, look now. Kelso, you help him look. Also get from him a picture of Mrs. Erth and a physical description."

The lieutenant turned away. Further questioning was futile at this point. Erth had made one break but this was a mistake he was not likely to repeat. Also the man seemed to be secretly pleased about something. He acted as if he had made some tremendous, long sought discovery, and was so elated that the disappearance of his wife was of no consequence. Harshbarger moved to the window and stood looking down.

The apartment was on the third floor in a respectable neighborhood. It was well but not lavishly furnished. Erth worked in a branch post office. Yet in spite of the respectable neighborhood, the nicely

furnished apartment, and what was probably a routine desk job, the sense of *monster* was strong in Lieutenant Harshbarger's mind. There was also a sense of urgency, of some necessity to hurry—to do what? Harshbarger shook his head at his own thinking. He could not imagine why he felt he had to hurry except that the feeling seemed to be connected in some way with his sense of *monster*. He didn't know why he kept sensing *monster* either. Why—But Kelso and Erth were back.

"Nothing missing, Lieutenant."

Harshbarger looked at Erth. The man still seemed pleased somewhere inside. "What about her night clothes?"

"Why—I don't know." Erth looked surprised.

"Come now. No man is ever married so long to a woman that he doesn't notice whether she is wearing pajamas or a nightgown when she goes to bed. Or perhaps she slept raw?"

"Uh? No. She wore pajamas?"

"Where are they?"

"I—I don't know. Maybe she wore them when she left."

"A woman wandering the city in pajamas is noticed. Go

look again and see if you can find them."

Again Erth and Kelso departed. When they returned, Erth was looking perturbed. "They're in the bed," he said.

"Then so far as you know she went out of here completely naked?"

"Well—" Erth seemed to draw strength from his inner elation. "Lieutenant you may make what you wish of this. My wife is missing. So far as I can tell, none of her clothes are gone, but I am not completely familiar with her wardrobe." His voice was under control and he dared to smile at Harshbarger.

"Okay," Harshbarger said. He moved into the bedroom and spoke to the chief of the lab men. "Absolutely nothing out of order," the lab chief told him. "No blood, no suspicious stains."

"And signs of a struggle?"

"Not even a scratch on a single piece of furniture."

"All right. Come on. We're leaving." It was time to go and he knew it. In the front room, he spoke to Erth. "We'll put your wife on the list of missing persons. If she comes home, or you hear from her, notify us immediately."

"I'll certainly do that," Erth said. The tone of his voice said he did not antici-

pate making such a call in the near future. "Thank you very much."

Outside, Kelso said, "What do you think?"

"He killed her."

"Huh?"

"I don't know *how* he did it and maybe he doesn't know either."

"What?"

"He didn't even know he had killed her when he called us. But my guess is that he knows now not only that he did it, but how."

"You mean he did it in his sleep? But what happened to the body? Did he hide that in his sleep too?" A note of sarcasm crept into Kelso's voice.

"Maybe he did just that."

"But Lieutenant! I was only trying—"

"To kid me. I know."

"All right, if you say so. But if you think this is murder, well, we ain't got a scrap of evidence."

"I know that," Harshbarger answered. "As a case, this is a stinker. It is also something else." Again the sense of *monster* came up inside of him. This time the thought seemed to bring with it an odor like the monkey cage at the zoo. "I want you to talk to the neighbors. Get all the dope you can on Mrs.

Erth and find out for sure if they ever had any fights. I'm going down the the branch post office where he works and talk to the people who work with him."

The superintendent was startled at Harshbarger's visit but was willing to cooperate. "There is nothing wrong with Erth's record here, except one thing. He's a good worker, is punctual, and always courteous."

"What's the minor thing?"

"Well—I even hesitate to mention it."

"It won't be misunderstood."

"He's a good worker, he gets his work done, but the fact is, he's also a day dreamer. I've seen him sit at his desk for an hour at a time lost in some dream."

"Um," Harshbarger said.

"But that's nothing against him," the superintendent hastily added. "If you wish, I'll let you talk to Niles Conklin, who has the desk next to him and who is his closest friend here."

"I wish," Harshbarger said.

Niles Conklin was tall and stooped with asthmatic breathing that sent him hastily digging a pill bottle out of his pocket and popping a blue capsule into his mouth

as he listened to what Harshbarger had to say. "Rita has disappeared! And you're from the police department checking up on Joe! You don't think he had anything to do with her disappearance, do you?"

"I'm curious as to why this thought should occur to you."

"Well — uh — " Conklin's breathing became a rasp. "No reason, except when a cop starts asking questions, you automatically think something is wrong. If you think Joe is to blame, you're on the wrong trail. Why, he just nursed her through an attack of appendicitis. Took better care of her than any nurse could have done, after she got home from the hospital, Joe did. There's nothing wrong with Joe."

"I have not said there is."

"Rita's been sickly, not only with this appendicitis, but with some rashes and stuff the doc's haven't been able to understand—I mean, that is, Joe's took mighty good care of her through all of this. Her doctor bills have practically kept him broke."

"Why should you be indignant at that?"

"Well, Joe needs his money, for books and things. He's working hard at—I mean, he works hard for it and he

ought to get to spend it for something besides doctor bills."

"I agree with you, Mr. Conklin. I see you have asthma."

"Yeah, and I get some rashes too, sometimes."

Harshbarger left the branch post office with the name of the doctor who had treated Mrs. Erth, and with two impressions. The first was an uneasy increase in his sense of *monster*. The odor that went along with it was now reptilian, like that of a snake pit. The second impression had to do with the necessity for hurrying. He could not define the latter except to say to himself that something seemed to be coming into existence that had to be stopped in a hurry if it was to be stopped at all.

The doctor was brusque at first. Then he took another look at his caller and his manner changed subtly but not enough to suit the lieutenant. Harshbarger had dealt with doctors before and knew them.

"You understand that everything a patient says to me is confidential."

"Of course. I would not ask you to betray your professional confidences."

"Well, then, you also know enough to know that you must get the written permission of the patient before I can talk to you." The doctor seemed to feel that in making this point he had succeeded in getting rid of an unwanted caller.

"In this case, that is impossible. The patient has disappeared."

"Oh." The point the medico thought he had made was gone, and he knew it.

"Her name is, or was, Rita Erth, Mrs. Joseph Erth."

"Was Rita Erth? She has disappeared, you say."

"As I said before, anything you say will be kept confidential."

At this point, the doctor's manner changed enough to suit even the lieutenant. "Of course, I'll answer any of your questions. Disappeared, you say. I hope there is no suspicion of foul play." The doctor waited for Harshbarger to comment. The lieutenant said nothing. "Actually, there was hardly anything remarkable about her case, except that the skin trouble for which she first came to me for treatment about six months ago refused to clear up. I thought I knew something about dermatology but her case baffled me. I sent her

to a specialist but even he didn't know what to make of it. Except for this skin rash, she was as healthy as a horse. Then came the trouble with her appendix—" The doctor's face showed perplexity. "We operated, of course. Couldn't afford to take a chance. Her recovery was excellent, at the hospital. Then—"

"She went home and didn't do so well?" Harshbarger said. Privately he wondered if the operation had been necessary in the first place.

"How did you know?" the surprised doctor asked.

"I was only guessing. What happened after she went home?"

"The favorable response she had made at the hospital slowed to practically nothing. I checked her almost every day but I could not discover what was causing the reaction."

"Did she have good care?"

"Excellent, for home care. Her husband hired a practical nurse to come in during the day and he came home early from work and took care of her each night. I thought perhaps some subconscious complex was retarding her recovery, but if such existed, I could never discover it."

"Was her appendix diseased?"

"There wasn't a thing wrong—" The doctor caught himself. A frown appeared on his face and quickly became a glare. "That was an unfair question."

"Sorry. I understand your position, doctor. While you were not certain of the diagnosis in advance, you could not take a chance on not operating, because the appendix might have been diseased. How did Erth and his wife get along?"

"Excellently, so far as I know. They seemed devoted to each other."

Harshbarger left the doctor's office with the knowledge that he had not as yet developed a motive for the disappearance of Rita Erth. "She had mysterious rashes and an attack of appendicitis that didn't come from a diseased appendix. She did all right while she was in the hospital but when she returned home, her recovery slowed down," he thought. "Erth's wife has illnesses that the doctors can't diagnose and Conklin, his closest friend, has asthma. It makes no sense!" he growled to himself. "If I didn't smell *monster*, I'd file this one among the unsolved cases."

When he reached headquarters, Kelso was waiting

for him. "How'd you know?" Kelso demanded.

"Know what?"

"That they had a quarrel last night?"

"Um?" Was this the motive he was searching for? "What about?"

"The canary."

"The devil!" Harshbarger felt a surge of disappointment. No matter how he twisted this bit of evidence, he could not see how people who seemed devoted to each other could have quarreled seriously over a canary. "What about it?"

"It was missing and she blamed him. I got this from their next door neighbor. Mrs. Erth accused him of having used the canary for an experiment."

"What kind of an experiment?"

Kelso shrugged. "The gal next door couldn't catch that part of it. All she knew was that Mrs. Erth blamed him because the canary was gone. He got mad enough to shout at her a couple of times to keep her mouth shut. That was all. So far as I can see, it's not important."

"The bird cage was empty," Harshbarger mused. "And this is important, somehow. But I don't see how. I don't like it, Kelso."

A month later, Harshbarger still didn't like the situation. The description of Rita Erth, plus her photograph, had been printed and distributed, with no response from any source. Erth had remained away from work for three days after she had disappeared, then had gone back to his job. He called the Bureau of Missing Persons every day to see if they had any information about his wife, making polite but perfunctory inquiries in a manner which indicated he didn't expect the police to find her. Having the man shadowed, Harshbarger discovered two things, that the friendship between Erth and Conklin was becoming very close. "Conklin seems to hang on every word Erth says. He almost acts like a disciple instead of a friend," one report said. Another report was more terse and more direct. "Conklin is beginning to worship Erth."

Harshbarger was interested, but at a loss as to what to do. Then another report came in which interested him even more and indicated a possible course of action. "Last night Erth took a long street car ride about the city, alone. He spent over an hour staring into a basement that

is being excavated for a new building."

Excavation staring was no crime, but a week later, with Erth now taking nightly rides about the city and always stopping and staring into the same hole, Harshbarger relieved the plainclothesman who was shadowing Erth and took up the trail himself. His feeling that he had to hurry had grown so strong that he could no longer excuse inaction on his part.

The excavation, which was to form the sub-surface foundation of a large office building, was already well below street level and was going deeper each working day. Lights flaring over it revealed a big power shovel at the bottom. A plume of smoke from a shack beside it revealed the hiding place of the night watchman. Harshbarger did not bother the watchman. Keeping out of sight, he waited to see if Erth would continue his nightly visits to this spot.

A cold wind was blowing up the lonely stone canyons from the river. Shivering, Harshbarger buttoned his topcoat against the wind. A bulldog revolver was in the side pocket of the coat. Through long habit, the lieutenant kept his hand near the

gun. Off in the distance, a bus backfired. Erth came along the street. As though attracted by curiosity alone, the man moved toward the excavation, put his hands on the rail, and stood staring down into it.

His action was so natural that Harshbarger felt foolish. Few human beings could resist their natural curiosity to look into an excavation. There was nothing wrong with such an action. His elbows resting on the guard rail, his head cupped in his hands, Erth stared downward as if something about this particular hole in the ground fascinated him. Suddenly he straightened up. Even under the flaring lights, Harshbarger could clearly see the expression of triumph on his face. Staring down into the hole, Joseph Erth looked like a man who had won a tremendous victory.

Harshbarger glanced downward. So far as he could tell in a single glance, nothing had happened. Then the night wind suddenly seemed to be blowing over tremendous fields of glacial ice as he realized what had happened.

The big power shovel had vanished.

Harshbarger's eyes seemed to freeze on the spot where

the shovel had stood. He tried to tell himself that those tons of steel had not existed. In the muck at the bottom of the hole, the marks of the big treads were clearly visible. Then he tried to tell himself that the shovel was still there but that something had happened to his eyes and he was not seeing it. A yell jerked his gaze away. The watchman had come out of his shack and was standing at the edge of the excavation and pointing downward.

"What—what the hell happened to that shovel?" The watchman sounded like a man on the verge of losing his mind.

The universe of Lieutenant John Harshbarger threatened to become unhinged. Shock rolled through the neural centers that had faced all the stress that could come the way of a police lieutenant. Harshbarger had faced killers with clubs, knives, and guns. His neural centers had withstood these stresses. They did not withstand the shock of not seeing the power shovel. The centers stopped all movement in him. Then, as the surge rolled through them, they sent out shock waves, first sudden spurting sweat, then trembling.

Again the word *monster*

went through his mind. The odor that came with it was that of putrescence. He stumbled to the railing around the excavation, clutched it, and held himself there while the shock waves rolled through him.

By the time these had subsided, Erth had disappeared. Harshbarger had not seen the man go but this did not matter. He knew what he was going to do.

In the lobby of the apartment building, Harshbarger removed his topcoat. He folded it over his left arm in such a manner that the butt of the bulldog revolver in the side pocket was within easy reach of his right hand. Experience had taught him that it was not only easier to draw a gun from the pocket of a coat held folded over his arm but also that the person he was facing was less likely to be alarmed by the movement. He went upstairs and rang the bell under the name Conklin.

"What do you want?" Conklin demanded. His hair was tousled and his eyes were heavy with sleep. He would have closed the door, if he had dared, but something about Harshbarger's face made him keep it open.

"I want to talk to you."

"Make it tomorrow."

"No. Now."

"Look—"

"There may not be any tomorrow for some of us."

Fear came up in Conklin and spread across his face as a tension. He sneezed violently and muttered something about his hay fever. Harshbarger walked in. The place was a one-bedroom apartment. The lieutenant kept right on walking until he had inspected the bedroom, the bathroom, and the kitchen.

"You forgot the clothes closet in the living room," Conklin said.

"I'm just getting to it," Harshbarger said. He opened the door of the closet and found it filled with clothes and nothing else.

"You think somebody is hiding here?" Conklin demanded.

"In my business you don't think when you can know, not if you want to stay alive."

The tall man was nervous. "You're upsetting me. I've got to take a pill." Harshbarger accompanied him to the kitchen, watched him draw a glass of water. Two pill bottles were on the coffee table in the living room. Conklin gulped a blue capsule, then set the half empty glass of water on the coffee table

The two men sat facing each other.

"How does Erth do it?" Harshbarger said.

He spoke quietly but the effect of his words was completely out of proportion to the tone of his voice. Conklin's reaction was close to spasm, a violent catching of the breath and a sudden clutching of the hands. "I—"

"You know what he is doing and how he does it!"

"But—" The spasm grew stronger.

"If you want to know where you figure into the case, I want to remind you that a woman, Rita Erth, is missing—dead. There is such a thing as an accomplice after the fact. The fact in this case may be murder." Harshbarger was relentless. His voice was cold. Both the words and the tone were merciless.

"M — murder?" Conklin heard only one word.

"Yes." Harshbarger knew that this one word had so scared Conklin that he would reveal the truth. A sense of triumph came up in the lieutenant. He had not caught Erth but he had caught Erth's accomplice. And the accomplice would talk.

"But—"

"Talk up!"

"All right, I'll tell you what I know. But I didn't have anything to do with Rita's disappearance. I swear I didn't—" Sweat was suddenly pouring from Conklin's face.

"You know how it was done!"

"Yes."

"Then talk!"

Harshbarger leaned forward. Then stopped leaning. The chair where Conklin had sat was vacant. In it, for an instant, atoms seemed to swirl in a gray fog. Then the fog was gone.

For a time—how long he did not know—Harshbarger sat without moving. Inside of him, the deep neural centers were disturbed again as panic tried to come up. He fought off the panic and kept his eyes fixed on the chair where Conklin had been sitting. He was aware of a frantic hope that he would see the man sitting there, yet he also knew he would not see Niles Conklin again. Slowly, as he beat down the panic, he became aware of a new sound in the room—that of a man breathing. He knew then that he was not alone.

Turning his head, he saw Joe Erth standing in the archway that led to the kitchenette.

"I have a key to the back door," Erth said. He exhibited it in his hand, then tossed it on the coffee table beside the two bottles of pills and the glass of water from which Conklin had drunk. Moving into the room, he sat down in the chair that Conklin had occupied. A faint smile was on his face. Harshbarger did not move.

"You seem shocked, Lieutenant."

"Not at all," Harshbarger said, still without moving.

An expression of surprise as faint as the smile had been showed on Erth's face. Inside, Erth seemed to be elated, high above the world. Harshbarger had the impression that Erth was looking down on him—and perhaps on all the rest of humanity—from a great height. An aura, a feeling of power, was about the man. Also—the lieutenant noticed it again—there was an odor.

"Aren't you even the least surprised?" Erth asked.

"No." Harshbarger wondered how his lips managed to form the single syllable of sound in the face of the sure knowledge in his mind that he was destined to go the same way Conklin had gone, unless he could stop it. The weight of the gun in the

pocket of the coat lying across his knees was his only hope. Imperceptibly, as if it had a will of its own, his right hand began to move toward the weapon. "It was a very good trick," he continued.

"Trick?" Erth came down from his height and showed surprise. He was also annoyed. Noting the annoyance, Harshbarger found additional hope in it. But his real hope was on the gun in his pocket.

"Yes."

"How can you say it was a trick when Conklin vanished right before your eyes?"

"Once I saw an elephant vanish from the middle of a stage."

Erth climbed again to his great height and looked down at him again. "You're a fool."

"Am I?" Harshbarger's moved an inch closer to the gun.

"Yes. But a dangerous one. You are almost as dangerous as Conklin though in a different way."

"How was Conklin dangerous?" He could feel the butt of the gun under his fingers.

"Because he was weak," Erth answered. "He had only one redeeming feature, he recognized my greatness. At first, I thought he would be an asset to me, but when I stood at the back door and heard

you putting pressure on him, I realized he would crack and tell everything he knew. I knew then that I had not only made a mistake in him but that I had made a mistake in telling anyone. A man with my ability to un-believe has to work completely alone. Otherwise some weakling will pull down even the greatest man, especially when he is near the beginning of his development."

"Megalomania, the illusion of greatness," the lieutenant thought. The idea brought no comfort with it. He had seen the power shovel vanish, he had been looking at Conklin when the man had gone into nothing. Whatever Erth might be, he could do what he said he could do. For the first time Harshbarger clearly recognized why he had sensed he had to hurry in this case. If Erth were not stopped now, he might never be stopped.

Harshbarger reached for the gun.

Like smoke, the butt of the weapon seemed to slip away from his grasp. Snatching at it, he realized there was no gun in his pocket.

Erth smiled faintly at him. "That elephant was in your own pocket, Lieutenant."

Cold came up inside of John Harshbarger, a wave of it.

Only his wits could help him now. He forced a puzzled frown on his face. "What are you talking about—an elephant in my pocket?" Was this his own voice that he was using? It sounded as if it belonged to somebody else.

"I'm talking about the gun you reached for but didn't find."

"Oh!" A lead weight had come into existence somewhere in the center of Harshbarger's chest, his heart, but he didn't know it. "I—You are mistaken. I had no gun in my pocket."

"Do you mean to sit there and tell me—"

"I'm sitting here and telling you that you are under arrest!" Harshbarger let the words drop like chunks of lead. He wondered what their impact would be. Could he scare Erth enough to get a fighting chance to think his way out of this? Could he keep the man talking?

Erth laughed. "Do you think I am tricking you? That gun—"

"Of course you're tricking me, or trying to. I had no gun."

"You utter fool!" Anger showed in Erth's voice. "I am the one man in the history of the world who has really

achieved the ability to un-believe—"

"Un-believe? What's that?"

Erth hesitated. Harshbarger could see the desire to boast come up in him. He knew that Erth was going to talk and he also knew why—Erth did not intend to let him live to tell what he would find out.

"There are three steps in the process of un-belief," Erth said. "The first is simple doubt. You know what doubt means. You question the accuracy of some statement or of some fact. That is doubt?"

"So what?"

"This is so what! This is my great discovery!" Erth seemed to grow in size as he talked, like a toad trying to huff and puff itself up until it was as big as an ox. Only this toad could do it! "In doubting, a person uses energy. Most investigators up to this time have thought that this was simple, ordinary energy. It remained for me to discover that this idea was not a true one, that actually in doubting a person generates inside of him and uses a special kind of energy which is not positive but negative in nature."

"I see," the big detective said. He was afraid he was telling the truth and that he

did understand. Cold was beginning to creep over him.

"The second step in the process is dis-belief. In doubt, you generate a certain amount of negative energy but you do not affect the existence of any object. If you dis-believe in the existence of an object, you generate and use more negative energy. In the case of small objects, pins and pencils, maybe even a living creature as big as a small bird, the second stage may be enough to eliminate them, but only when you can achieve the third and final stage, that of un-belief, can you actually remove large objects from existence. In this case, the objects cease to exist as positive energy and become negative mere energy — un-things—"

"Like an un-wife!" Harshbarger said. His voice had gravel in it.

"Yes." For an instant, Erth looked perturbed. He had said more than he had intended to reveal. "However, I have to admit that while the canary was deliberately wiped out, and marked my achievement of the second stage, Rita's disappearance was a kind of an accident, and was my first big break!"

"What?" Harshbarger's fingers itched for the gun that

was no longer in his pocket.

"I didn't really intend to un-believe her. Sure, she had made me mad when she suspected what had happened to the canary but I didn't actually want to destroy her. I was just practicing on her, thinking maybe I would give her some more rashes—"

"You did that to her?"

"Well, yes."

"Go on."

"She was asleep at the time it happened. I had been practicing on her for months, when she was sleeping, without her knowing it, giving her these rashes. This time I hit the third stage and passed out too. The little extra surge of power I used to un-believe her left me drained. The next morning I didn't actually know what had happened."

"Uh!" Harshbarger said. His mind was desperately seeking a solution to the simple problem of staying alive. His fingers still itched for the gun he no longer had but he knew that even if he still had the weapon, it would not solve the problem for him. Erth could un-believe him before he could use the gun. Then was there a solution? Out of the corner of his eyes he noticed the water glass and the two pill bottles sitting

on the coffee table. An idea flicked through his mind. It was so impossible that he put it aside. As Erth talked, the idea kept coming back, reminding him that an impossible solution was better than no solution at all.

Erth was huffing and puffing himself up. The sure knowledge of power was in every word he spoke. He was playing a game, torturing his victim by telling what had happened, before he destroyed him. It was a game that he enjoyed. Harshbarger wondered how many more minutes would elapse before Erth tired of his game. He twisted and squirmed.

"So that's the story, Lieutenant," Erth finished. "I thought you'd like to hear it. Many historical figures, Paracelsus among them, have groped toward the concept of negative energy, conceiving that for every pig there must be an un-pig, but it remained for me to discover how to generate this energy within the human nervous system, and how to use it!" His feeling of power was growing stronger with every word he used.

"Fantasy!" Harshbarger said.

"What—"

"You talk a good game!"

Harshbarger put disdain into his voice.

"Damn you, you still don't believe me!" Anger surged through the man.

"How do you do this—unbelieving?"

"Ah!" Power came up in Erth again. "It is a mental process which I, and I alone, know how to use. At the end of this process, something which I call a hole opens in the middle of my head, near the thalamus—"

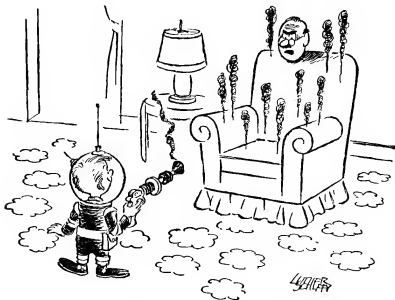
"I thought you had a hole in your head! This proves it."

"You still don't believe me!"

"You're the biggest liar since Goebbels. Do you pretend that you can un-believe just anything?"

"Certainly!"

"All right, I'll give you a chance to prove it." Harshbarger leaned forward. Erth leaned backward and the lieutenant knew the man was not only suspicious but ready to



"Junior, we don't point even toy guns at peop—"

use his power. Deftly, with fingers that did not tremble, the big detective lined up the two pill bottles and the glass of water so that all three stood in a row. They looked like two privates and a fat corporal lined up ready for execution.

"Ah, I see. You want me to demonstrate on these!"

"Yes. But one at a time. To make certain that you don't trick me, I'll point to the object I wish you to un-believe. And I want you to work fast!"

"I can do that."

"All right, un-believe this one." Harshbarger pointed to the bottle that contained blue capsules.

The bottle vanished.

Harshbarger pointed to the second bottle. "Now un-believe this one."

The second bottle vanished.

Without hesitating for an instant, the lieutenant pointed to Erth. "Now un-believe yourself!"

Joe Erth went away.

For a split second, he tried to catch himself, but the power flowing from within him was already upon him. He vanished. After he had gone, a hole was revealed in space at about the spot the

center of his head had formerly occupied. The hole seemed to be composed of gray smoke which was spinning inward and was turning in a constantly shifting direction that strained the eyes as they twisted and turned and tried to follow it.

John Harshbarger stared at the spinning gray smoke that filled the hole. He did not know whether he was seeing an atomic dance as matter changed into negative energy or whether he was seeing something else. A nauseous, rancid odor was suddenly in the room like the den of some wild animal. Slowly the gray smoke turned in upon itself, spilling away into the hole of Joe Erth's un-belief. When it had vanished, only the odor remained, like the smell of some monster that had tried to creep upon the stage of the human race and had been destroyed before it could grow strong enough to rise up on its own power and challenge man.

Slowly, Harshbarger got to his feet and left the apartment. Outside, for a time, the odor seemed to follow him like some shadowy monster stalking him in the night. Then, like Joe Erth, it quietly went away.

THE END

HOW GREEN WAS MY LOVER

BY ARNOLD MARMOR

Forget all this fiction regarding the fate of the first visitor from outer space. The boys in Ulcer Alley have it figured out to the last decimal point—and the Hooper rating proves they're never wrong!

IT'S Madison Avenue to the peasants. We knew it as Ulcer Alley. Home of the advertising agencies. I worked for one of the biggest. Welch and Dunbar.

Norman Welch sent for me.

I stood ankle deep in Aubusson before the master.

"Sit," Welch said.

I sat in the damask chair.

"What is the whole country talking about?" Welch asked.

"The Venusian who cracked up a month ago," I answered.

"Right. And the American people will continue to talk about him for months to come."

"Yes, sir."

"He has proven a remarkable fellow. He has mastered every language on earth during the month he has been here. Tomorrow he appears before the U. N. and then—"

"Yes, sir?"

"—he is free to go where he pleases and do what he wants. Do you have any idea of what I have in mind?"

"Sign him up to an exclusive contract."

"Testimonials, television appearances."

"It's great."

"Go. Bring him to me."

The master had spoken.

His name was Grun and he was staying at the Palm Tree Hotel. The lobby was crowded with reporters and photographers. I slipped a bell-hop five skins and got the room number.

A guy with a lot of muscle opened up.

"I am seeking one Venusian named Grun," I announced.

"Sorry, buddy."

"Will you give him a message for me?"

"Sure. Make it snappy."



"Ask him if he wants to make a million dollars."

"I'll ask him," he said, giving me a funny look. He closed the door and I cooled my heels.

He opened the door again. "Come on in."

I walked in.

He pointed to a door. "In there."

I opened the door and walked in. He was standing, smoking a cigarette. He was seven feet tall and green-skinned. He was the skinniest thing I'd ever seen in my life. He could have passed for a human except for the green skin and his hands. They were webbed.

"Sit down, won't you?"

I sat.

"What's this about a million dollars?"

"You interested in a million dollars?" I asked.

"Since there's no chance of my ever returning to my own planet I may as well be comfortable here."

"What kind of cigarette are you smoking?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Silver Tips."

"Don't smoke them anymore. Smoke Heralds. They're cleaner, fresher, and are filtered. In fact they're all filter and no tobacco."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well, there's *some* tobacco in them."

"Do you mind telling me what this is all about?"

I stood up. "My name is Joel Falik and I work for Welch and Dunbar. They're an advertising firm. We want to sign you up."

"I see."

"You'll make a million easy. Smoke this brand, drink this whiskey, slurp this soup, wear this rag. What's good enough for an interplanetary visitor is good enough for the American people. You smoke Heralds and they'll all switch to Heralds. You wear Flecklfluger's clothes and they'll all wear Flecklfluger's clothes."

"Amazing. All I have to do is use those products and I'll be paid for it. It's absolutely amazing."

I whipped out a contract. "Just sign your name on the dotted line."

"Oh, we have time for that. That man outside is a Security Guard and he's to take me to the U. N. building in half an hour. After that my time is free. I'll come to your offices tomorrow morning. If that's all right with you?"

"Why, sure."

"And leave the contract behind. I want a lawyer to look at it." He smiled. "If you don't mind?"

I heard the news over the radio late that night. Grun told the U. N. exactly what

he thought. Russia threatened to go to war against Venus but I knew it wouldn't come off. After the tumult had died down Grun was ushered out of the U. N.

I switched off the radio and went to bed.

The next morning found me dead to the world. It was raining and rain makes me dull. Sinus, I think.

I drank some coffee and went to the office. Welch was waiting for me. "Well?"

"He'll show up today. He said he will."

"You heard what happened at the U. N.?"

"I heard."

"The American people will take him to their hearts as never before."

"Hear, hear."

"Did he sign the contract?"

"No."

"What?"

"He wants a lawyer to look at it first."

"Do you think he's a shrewdie?"

"I think so."

"I don't like that very much."

"I know."

Welch rubbed his jaw. "Lawyers always read the fine print."

"We can't control his mind and body," I pointed out.

Welch sighed. "As long as we get him under some kind of contract I'll be satisfied. When he shows up bring him right in."

"Yes, sir."

Grun showed up an hour later.

I took him into Welch's office and we talked over the contract. We straightened out some details and Welch gave me full charge. Grun was now my baby.

"You'll move in with me," I told him. "I think it'll be better that way."

"Just as you say. But I want my own bedroom."

"Sure thing. I'm going to get you on the Tippy Larkin show. He's a television comedian and we handle the account for his sponsor. The Honey Bee soap people."

"It is good soap?"

"Miserable. Come on. We'll move your stuff from your hotel into my flat."

The biggest problem was the reporters. They were everywhere. I even found a dame reporter under my bed. It was really funny finding a dame *under* my bed. She made goo goo eyes at Grun but he only laughed at her. I shoved her out and I helped Grun unpack.

Grun's appearance on the

Larkin show came off a month later. Grun had a flair for comedy. He delivered his lines like an expert. But the green skin was a problem. It came out lousy on the television screen. Fuzzy, like.

We shoved Grun on some radio programs. And a few testimonials in the newspapers for our cigarette and whiskey sponsors. We got some new accounts and the agency was in its glory.

"You're going to pose for some shots with a lovely model," I told him one day. "Sundrenched Orange Juice."

"Okay." He appeared bored.

"This model is stacked. Wait till you see her in a bathing suit."

"Oh? Will I be in trunks?"

"Sure."

"No."

"What?"

"I won't pose in trunks."

"What then? In the nude?"

"Call it off."

"But it's all set. What's the idea?"

"Sorry, Joel."

"If you read your contract over again—"

"Sue me."

So we posed him in slacks and a sport shirt. I just didn't get it."

That night, Grun said, "It's all off. I'm leaving."

"Huh?"

"I'm going to Mexico."

"Will you please tell me what this is all about?"

"I'm in love with you."

"What?"

Grun took off his jacket, then his shirt. It was the first time I had ever seen Grun undress. Grun stood there naked from the waist up. "Do I have to strip completely?"

"No," I said.

She dressed. "We're not as bosomy as earth women, are we?"

"But—but you never said anything."

"The authorities took it for granted I was a man. On Venus our voices are the same. It didn't take me five minutes before I found out this was a man's world. So I kept my mouth shut."

"Look. Nobody has to know if you don't want them to. I'll keep mum."

"Do you know what it's like living here with you, wanting you?"

I stared at her.

"You wouldn't marry me, would you, Joel?"

I bit my lip.

"I didn't think you would."

"You don't have to live here. I just wanted to keep an eye on you. You can stay in the best hotel in New York."

"No, Joel. I have to get away."

"What'll I tell Welch?"

"That is important, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry. You've made money for him and he should be satisfied. But he won't be. The hell with him."

She packed and then she left without a backward glance.

I felt kind of funny after that. A dame with green skin and webbed hands. But she was no dame. She was a lady.

Welch stood up and put his palms on the desk flat. "You're responsible," he said coldly.

"How did you know?"

"How did I know? It's on all the news broadcasts. That plane he took to Mexico smacked against a mountain. He's dead. Burned to a crisp. The crew and all the passengers. How did he get away from you?"

I was stunned. My skin tingled.

"You idiot. You're responsible."

"Shut up."

"What? What?"

"I quit. Through." Then I bared my teeth and laughed in his face. Like a damn wolf. I turned and raced for the door, laughing the whole time.

THE END

DOUBLE OR SOMETHING

BY MILTON LESSER

THE three foot tall creature with scaly pink skin and four arms poised a long needle over Martin Morley's bared abdomen and said, "This isn't going to hurt at all."

"You mean, it's not going to hurt *you*," Martin replied. He had long since stopped wondering how the creature could apparently talk English. He had long since—under certain circumstances fifteen minutes can seem a very long time—stopped marveling over the inside of the spaceship which, come to think of it, looked very much like the insides of spaceships on TV or in the movies.

Martin squirmed under the three metal bands which held him firmly, across his shoulders, his loins, his legs.

Take one good-looking man like Martin Morley. Multiply him by two. Then give him (them) an uninhibited girl like Janet as a bride looking forward to a honeymoon with the man (men) she loves, and you have as mad a mixup as you'd want. Especially when a three-foot creature from outer space is waiting to turn Martin into a group!

The needle pierced the pale skin of Martin's abdomen.

It didn't hurt.

"You see?" said the little pink creature.

Martin went numb and lay there horrified while the operating table was wheeled under an incredible bank of machinery. He thought of all the things, none of them good, which such creatures did to people on the TV shows. At this point the question was entirely rhetorical, but he asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I already told you. I have come to your planet only to collect specimens."

"Are you from Mars?" On the TV shows, they were always from Mars.

"My star is outside the



Janet stood frozen with astonishment.

range of your greatest telescopes."

Crimson radiance flooded down on Martin from a nozzle poking down toward him beneath the incredible machine. It made his skin tingle and he wondered if the creature meant he, Martin Morley, was going to be the specimen. It would be a hell of a way to cut short his honeymoon, he thought. If Janet stayed on in the big resort hotel, awaiting his return while he was speeding with the pink creature to the other end of the universe or God knew where, she wouldn't even have money to pay the hotel bill.

"You are not the specimen," said the pink creature, which could apparently read his mind. "There. You see?"

The crimson radiance faded. Martin blinked. He saw.

He was standing up at the other end of the spaceship cabin, flexing his legs as if they were cramped.

No, he was right here, flat on his back, secured to the operating table.

But he saw himself standing there, too.

"How do you feel?" the creature demanded.

"Pretty good," said Martin.

"Just fine," said the other

Martin, smiling at them both.

"Now perhaps you understand," the creature declared as it examined the new Martin Morley, the second Martin Morley. "This is my specimen. You're free to go, young man."

"How do you do it, with mirrors?" After all, it had to be an optical illusion.

"The machine creates an energy mold, which is frozen and transmuted into matter. While the personality may vary because the psitrons are sometimes altered, physically this man is your identical twin—complete to retinal pattern and fingerprints. He's therefore an ideal specimen for my collection back home, and I've obtained him without interfering in the internal affairs of your planet or harming anyone, including yourself. Here, I'll unfasten you."

Just then, the second Martin Morley, who had been listening intently, swung his right fist around and bounced it with brutal force off the small pink creature's tiny jaw. The creature thudded against a bulkhead of the spaceship cabin and lay still.

"So long, sucker," said the second Martin Morley. "You be the specimen." He opened the airlock of the spaceship,

which had been parked four miles north of the Lake George Hotel in the Adirondack Mountains, and disappeared into the warm sunshine outside.

Ten minutes later, the pink creature regained consciousness, dexterously fingered the lump on its jaw and smiled a very human rueful smile at Martin. "You see, the psitrons have been altered," it said. "You were selected, among other things, for your docility."

"Just go out and find him, huh?"

"No, I couldn't do that. It's one of our laws: once I obtain the original from which the specimen will be copied, I can't leave the spaceship again."

"But you can't take me with you!" Martin had visions of himself on display in a zoo somewhere while pink creatures and their children came to gawk at him and offer tiny pink peanuts.

"Of course not. Stop worrying. I'll simply make another copy."

"But what about the other guy?"

"The District Supervisor would be furious if he found out, young man. But then, he probably won't visit this particular planet, this Earth, for

another fifty of your years. I don't have to worry."

"You don't . . ."

The crimson radiance was bathing him again.

The crimson radiance faded.

A third Martin Morley suddenly appeared, taking the place of the second one which by now, Martin thought, was romping somewhere outside in the green hills of the Adirondacks.

"There we are," said the pink creature, unfastening the metal bands which pinned Martin to the table. "Thank you for your time. Good-bye. Good luck."

"But—"

"Good-bye."

The last thing Martin saw inside the spaceship was the pink creature leading the third Martin Morley toward a hammock at one end of the cabin. Then Martin was outside. The hull of the spaceship gleamed behind him. The Adirondacks air smelled clear and delightful.

His car was gone.

He'd been on his way into town on this, the second day of his marriage, to buy some roses for Janet, when his car had broken down for no apparent reason and the pink creature had found him. Did the second Martin Morley

have the car? If he'd been duplicated complete with clothing, Martin assumed he had a driver's license as well.

Scratching his head, he started on the long walk back to the Lake George Hotel. When he had covered the first mile, something bright flashed in the sky behind him. He whirled and caught a glimpse of the spaceship, a speck of silver against the blue sky, disappearing.

He wandered across the golf course north of the hotel, wondering how he'd tell Janet about the car. "My identical twin took it. I know I didn't have an identical twin before we were married, but I have one now. You see, there was this little pink fellow in a spaceship, and . . ." It wouldn't do. It wouldn't do at all. If the evidence of his tired feet and his missing car were not so irrefutable, he'd doubt the whole thing himself. Too many drinks on their wedding night. Too much sun with the top of the convertible down. Hallucination.

"Fore!" someone yelled.

Martin trotted off the fairway and skirted the copse of pine trees that led down from it to the hotel grounds. He'd call his insurance broker in

New York and announce the theft of the car. He'd call the local sheriff about it. And tell them about his double? That was ridiculous.

He'd start by telling Janet he'd left the convertible in town for some repairs and worry about complications, if any, as they appeared.

He found Janet sunning herself on the edge of the swimming pool, slick with suntan oil, her eyes shut, her lips parted in a faint smile, her chest above the scant bra of the bathing suit and her long shapely legs below the brief trunks golden with the oil and the first suggestion of sunburn. He wished he had a camera so he could capture her that way, so lovely, so unaware.

"Hi," he said.

She opened her eyes and smiled, then scowled. "Why did you change back into your clothing?" she said. "You wanted to go swimming."

"Did I?"

"How did you change so fast, anyway? It hasn't been five minutes."

"Well, I—"

"You're beginning to surprise me, Martin; pleasantly, darling. The way you put that suntan oil on me, right out here in front of everybody." Janet giggled. "It was

shameless, but I liked it. I liked it, darling."

Janet sat up abruptly and got her arms around him and squeezed close. She felt warm and supple in his arms, but she was sticky with suntan oil.

"Janet. Everyone is watching."

"You just said you didn't care who watched us or anything." Janet pouted and moved away from him.

"My shirt. You've stained my shirt."

"Phooey on your shirt. Are you going to get back into your bathing suit or not?"

"Of course, dear." And Martin headed for the main building of the hotel. He would suspend judgment. He would not jump to conclusions. It certainly did sound like the second Martin Morley had come directly here to the hotel, but he'd wait and see.

He passed himself, going out, in the lobby.

The second Martin Morley was wearing a bathing suit and a robe. His suit and his robe. Martin's. The man had the audacity to wink at him and walk right on, chest out and shoulders squared. He walked with a kind of strutting stride which Martin suddenly found himself ad-

miring. Martin checked an impulse to follow him and demand the return of the suit and robe.

Instead, Martin let his feet lead him into the hotel bar. For the first time since his Army days, he felt he needed a drink. "Whiskey," he told the barman.

The fat middle-aged man wiped his hands on his white apron and smiled at Martin. "Fourth one already this morning, Mr. Morley. You're my best customer, you are."

"Uh, a man works up a thirst, swimming."

"Yes, sir. Water chaser again?"

Martin nodded.

"Uh-oh." The barman was looking over Martin's shoulder. "Better watch out, Mr. Morley."

"What's the matter?"

"That's Irene Duggen's husband right behind you."

Martin was about to say he didn't know any Irene Duggen or any Irene Duggen's husband, when a hand, a very large, strong hand, descended on his shoulder. In the mirror behind the bar he could see a big man in a well-padded jacket, a man with a square, mean face and angry eyes. It was this man's hand which rested, ungently, on his shoulder.

"All right, you," the man said. "Irene sings here to entertain your paying guests, but that don't mean you can get fresh with her or paw her."

"I," said Martin coldly, "am a married man." He'd been married exactly one day and decided, thinking of the lovely Janet, he liked the sound of it. He said, "I am a married man."

"Then I feel sorry for your wife, but I'm warning you to leave Irene alone. Izat clear?"

"I assure you, I have no intentions upon—"

"Yeah?"

Martin gulped. It was the other Martin Morley, of course. Making trouble for him. "I—I'm sorry," Martin said contritely. "Your wife is, uh, a very attractive woman."

"Why, you punk! You just stand there and practically admit you tried to make a pass at Irene. I oughta break your neck."

"Now, Mr. Duggen," said the barman.

The fist of Duggen's other hand, which was not resting on Martin's shoulder but ballooning toward him, seemed enormous. At the last moment he tried to duck, but the fist caught him high on the left cheekbone and dumped him on the floor alongside the

bar, where one of his arms dangled over the brass foot-rail.

"You can tell the manager Irene quits, as of now," Duggen said to the barman, who had come around the bar to help Martin to his feet. Then Duggen wandered off into the lobby somewhere, muttering to himself.

"This one is on the house," the barman told Martin sympathetically: "Man, are you gonna have a shiner."

Martin could see it already, in the mirror. The whole left side of his face was numb.

"That's what I was trying to tell you, Mr. Morley. That Duggen usta be a prizefighter. He flattened Tony Galento once. Man, you didn't have a chance."

Martin drank the free shot of whiskey and could feel it burn clear down to his stomach. He decided he liked the sensation, though.

He gulped. He was, he suddenly realized, a fugitive.

He would have to keep away from Janet and everyone else. He had a shiner. The other Martin Morley didn't. Of course, he could let the whole ugly thing come out, how there were two of them and he couldn't help it if he got poked in the kisser for something the other Martin

Morley did. No, he couldn't do that. Some place deep inside his brain he harbored the notion that he might be, he just might be, imagining all this. If he were and if he announced it to the world at large and Janet in particular he would (a) be eligible for admission to the booby hatch, and (b) be minus a lovely young bride.

But this was his honeymoon. And, if he hid himself away and nursed his shiner, the second Martin Morley could swim with his wife and probably apply more suntan oil in the way which made her giggle, could hike with her in the woods, and eat with her, and after dinner dance with her and have a few drinks from a bottle of champagne, like last night, and then retire with her to their room where . . .

Oh, no, Martin thought desperately. He couldn't hide, shiner or no. He must do anything but hide, even if it meant people, Janet included, would see Martin Morley without a black eye at times and with it at other times.

There were, he realized, some alternatives. He could "get rid of" the other Martin Morley as people were "got rid of" in mystery stories. He

shuddered. That was out of the question.

He could supply the second Martin Morley with a shiner to match his own. He smiled.

They were out there in the pool, swimming. Janet, Martin's wife. And that other man, Janet's other husband. It was probably the only case of legal bigamy on record, Martin thought miserably. They swam well together, matching strokes in the Australian crawl, the sidestroke, the backstroke. Janet seemed to be enjoying herself. Martin winced. They switched to a crawl again, churning the water. Janet pecked playfully at the second Martin Morley's lips as they twisted around, then was swimming away from him at a furious clip, mock horror on her lovely face, as he pursued her. Naturally, she let him catch her.

Martin wanted to dive in after them, clothes and all.

Half an hour later, they slipped out of the pool and decided it was time to eat lunch. Standing in the shadow of the lifeguard's chair, Martin watched them.

"I want to fix my face, darling," Janet said. "Won't take a minute."

The other Martin Morley patted her shapely posterior

and told her, "I'll be in the bar. And hurry, honey. Even if you're away for five minutes, I miss you."

His lips set in a grim line, Martin followed his double into the bar. The barman looked up at them, the Martin Morley in bathing trunks and robe and the Martin Morley in T-shirt and slacks, and gaped, and did a double-take, and dropped a bottle of Scotch which shattered on the boardwalk behind the bar. "Oh, Gawd," he said. "Why couldn't I just see pink elephants?"

Martin walked up behind his double and tapped his shoulder. "Turn around," he said.

The other Martin Morley turned to face him, and grinned. "You're resourceful, Martin," he admitted. "I thought our little friend would take you off into space with him."

"You," said Martin, "can go to hell."

"Really, that's hardly the attitude to take. What in the world happened to your eye?"

"This," said Martin, and struck his double in the face. The other Martin Morley tumbled to the floor, clutching at his cheek while Martin nursed his bruised knuckles. Martin waited **only** long

enough to see the discoloration forming below his double's eye, then left the bar quickly and headed for their room.

He took the stairs two at a time and hoped Janet wouldn't decide to use the elevator. He'd have some explaining to do about being in slacks and T-shirt again, but thought he could manage it.

As he reached the second floor landing, he caught a glimpse of Janet disappearing into the elevator, its door sliding shut behind her. He ran down the hall and clawed at the doors, but the cage was already on the way down. He could go downstairs again, he thought, but by now the other Martin Morley would be leaving the bar and he couldn't chance a meeting. Wearily, he unlocked the door to their room and walked inside.

Something was tapping at the window.

Martin opened it quickly and unfastened the screen. The little pink creature hopped inside.

"I've been looking all over for you," it said.

"I thought you left. I saw your spaceship taking off."

"I'm in trouble, young man. My luck, the District Supervisor met me on your planet's moon before I could

switch to star-drive. You don't lie to a District Supervisor."

"So?" said Martin hopefully.

"So, I'm in trouble. Leaving two of you on this planet is illegal interference. I can't."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to take you back. Sorry."

Martin had been as successful in blackening the eye of his double as Duggen, the ex-fighter, had been in blackening Martin's own eye. It made him feel, suddenly, like a lion. An hour ago he might have accepted the little pink creature's decision with dull resignation. Now he said, "You can't do that. I'm sorry."

"What do you mean, I can't? I have here a weapon which can render you inert, and . . ."

"Wait a minute!" Martin cried desperately. "I'll tell your District Supervisor. You wouldn't be fooling anyone. That's interfering with our internal affairs, isn't it? I mean, taking back the original and leaving the double here?"

"You couldn't prove it."

"I'll find a way."

"Young man, you're giving

me a lot of trouble. I already have one copy, and that's quite enough. But the District Supervisor . . ."

"You've got to listen to the Supervisor."

"But I'm already late in starting back. I can't go looking for your double, I'm liable to be seen. I've got to take you."

"Listen. You wait some place. I'll get him for you. You'd rather take back the double than the real me wouldn't you?"

"I suppose so."

"Then let me get him for you."

"I told you I'm already late."

"Give me one day. Just twenty-four hours."

"And if you can't deliver him?"

Martin thought: I'll cross that bridge if and when I reach it.

"If you can't deliver, you'll give yourself up to me?"

"I'll get him for you."

"Twenty-four hours, then."

"Where will you be?"

"The same place, young man. Where I first found you. Your word of honor?"

"Yes," said Martin, and looked at his watch. It was 12:15.

"Good luck," the little pink creature told him and floated

toward the open window and disappeared through it.

Outside the door, there was a noise. Martin barely had time to duck into the bathroom and hope whoever it was wouldn't stay long. He felt ridiculous, a fugitive in the room he was renting here at the hotel for twenty dollars a night. But it might be Janet and the other Martin Morley, and he had to hide.

It was a bellhop. The boy walked without hesitation to the closet, where Martin saw him gather up their three-piece set of luggage, a gift from Janet's aunt, and carry it from the room.

They were checking out, Martin realized desperately. That no good other Martin Morley was trying to keep one step ahead of him—and so far succeeding.

Martin rushed outside and headed for the stairs. At the landing, he collided with Irene Duggen's husband.

"I was looking for you," the big man said. "You done it again."

"I did not. I most certainly did not."

But, of course, his double had done whatever Duggen had in mind.

This time, Martin parried Duggen's wild swing and got a numb forearm for his trou-

ble. Maybe Duggen had flattened Tony Galento once, Martin thought, but he's out of shape now. Martin sank a hard fist into Duggen's midsection and smelled liquor on the big man's breath as all the air wheezed from his lungs. Duggen countered with a left hook which blackened Martin's other eye before his paralyzed solar plexis bent him double and sent him tumbling down the stairs.

For Martin it was a clean knockout—and another black eye.

He ran down after Duggen's falling form and burdled the supine heap at the bottom of the stairs, then sprinted across the lobby toward the main entrance of the hotel.

The fight with Duggen had cost him valuable time. He stepped outside in time to see the cream-colored convertible speeding away, Janet driving, while a bellhop was waving at the other Martin Morley who waved back cheerfully after, no doubt, dispensing a too-liberal tip with Martin's money.

"But you," the bellhop said, looking at Martin in sudden, wild alarm, "you . . . I mean, you just . . . left . . . in that car, Mr. Morley, sir."

"I sure did," said Martin.

"Did I tell you where I was going?"

"Well, you wanted to know the best way back to New York via the Rip Van Winkle Bridge . . . hey, but you already left! What's going on here?"

"Thank you," said Martin. He went inside to the desk and got a train schedule. The next train for New York would leave the town half a dozen miles away in two hours. There was a two-engined plane leaving the Adirondack resort area in about half an hour, but Martin barely had train fare in his pockets.

He went outside and walked down the blacktop road, wondering if he could get a lift into town in time to catch the train. He shrugged. He'd run the whole way if necessary.

It was not until ten o'clock that night that he reached the apartment building on Manhattan's upper East Side where he and Janet were going to convert his bachelor quarters into their first home. The doorman was new, barring the way politely but firmly.

"Whom did you wish to see, sir?"

He was about to say he was

Martin Morley, then thought better of it. Up to a point, he could prove it. But the second Martin Morley had probably already arrived with Janet and Martin once again found himself without any real identity.

"I'd like to see the Morleys," he said. "Are they home?"

"Are they? I'll say. I mean, yes, sir. You see, they're throwing a party and—"

"Party?"

"Yes, sir. The neighbors have made it known to the management that they are, uh, home. It's apartment 7-B."

Martin thanked the man and took the elevator to the seventh floor. He could hear the music, sultry Latin-American rhythms, quite distinctly from the hall.

"Psst!"

The hall was dimly lit, but Martin could see someone poking his head out through the partially opened door to the incinerator room. "Psst! Martin."

He came closer. It was the other Martin Morley.

"Don't tell me you're locked out, too?"

"Yes. Of course, I have a key. But—"

"But nothing," said Martin, jamming the door shut.

He wouldn't look this unexpected gift horse in the mouth. He walked briskly to the apartment and let himself in swiftly with his key.

The music had stopped. The apartment was dark, but Martin could hear subdued talking and laughter. His apartment reeked of spilled liquor. Someone stubbed his toe on the furniture in the darkness. Howling, he clutched at Martin.

"What's going on here?" Martin demanded in a loud voice.

"Shh! She'll find you. Blind man's bluff, silly. Janet is 'it.'"

The voice was familiar, but he couldn't place it. Some friend of Janet's, probably. It was a strange game for them to play, but then, they all were under the influence of liquor and Janet's circle had been known for wild parties. Martin didn't mind because it gave him time to think. The other Martin Morley could be expected to use his own duplicate key on the apartment door and let himself in. What Martin couldn't figure out was why he was outside there in the incinerator room in the first place.

"I've got you. I've got you!"

Hands clawed him in the

darkness. He recognized Janet's voice—Janet, decidedly under the influence of liquor. According to the rules of the game as he recalled them, she would now have to identify him in the darkness. Her hands explored his face. He could feel her breath against his cheek. She giggled, then kissed him.

"It's you, darling. It's Martin. Put on the lights, everybody."

In the few seconds of darkness which remained there was a hushed quiet as everyone waited to see if Janet's identification had been correct. Then someone said, laughing, "You're wrong, dear. I'm over here. I ought to be jealous, you thinking someone else was me." Martin's voice. The other Martin Morley, inside the apartment now.

The lights went on.

Janet stood next to him, smiling, a silk handkerchief over her eyes as a blindfold. The other Martin Morley was making his way across the room with a confident grin on his face and dark glasses to hide the blackeye. The grin dissolved as leering party faces began to stare at them incredulously. Martin dashed across the room for the light switch and plunged the apart-

ment into darkness again.

"I saw them, I tell you. Two of them, both Martin."

"If you can't hold your liquor, why do you drink so much?"

"No, I saw them too."

"Really."

"Well, I did."

"That'll teach you to chase martinis with champagne."

Martin thought desperately. He could flee and wait until the party was over, but they might celebrate until two or three in the morning and he only had until tomorrow noon to return the duplicate Martin Morley to the little pink creature waiting in the Adirondack mountains.

"Turn the lights on, someone."

That settled it. So far, only a couple of drunks had seen the two of them and, naturally, would not be believed. Martin bolted for the door and made it outside just as the lights flared behind him. He waited beyond a right-angle turn in the hallway and watched the slow, agonizing progress the minute hand of his watch made across the dial. Eleven o'clock. Twelve. Twelve thirty. The first of the guests began to trickle out. One o'clock. Would they stay

forever? One- thirty. More tipsy guests departing.

"I tell you, there were two of them. You heard the door close yourself."

"If you can't hold your liquor, you shertainly, *cer*tainly shouldn't drink."

Two O'clock. More departures. Did they have a whole army in there or something? Two thirty. A sleepy-eyed Janet and the other Martin Morley came to the door with the last of their guests. The other Morley seemed to be enjoying himself immensely. Or anticipating something eagerly.

"G'night, Freddy. G'night, Harriet."

"Janet, it was wonderful. I'm glad you cut short your honeymoon."

"Night, Janet."

"G'night, Freddy."

"Night, Martin old boy."

"Good night, Fred."

Fred and Harriet headed for the elevator and were soon on their way down.

"You know the song, darling," Janet said, smiling up at the other Martin Morley. "'Till they all go home.'"

"They're all gone now, sweetheart," said the other Martin Morley, circling his wife's slim waist with his arm and kissing her cheek.

Beyond the turn in the hall-

way, Martin boiled and raged in silent despair.

"Sleepy, Martin darling?"

"Let's go inside."

"Let's. Yes, let's."

The door shut. Martin lighted a cigaret and smoked it until the glowing tip was a quarter of an inch from his fingers. The imposter. The no good, immoral, illegal, counterfeit imposter. Martin walked to the door wrathfully and inserted his key in the lock. He had no plans beyond a wild desire to wreak bodily damage upon his double. He opened the door and made his way inside through the party-scarred living room. He could hear the shower hissing behind the bathroom door.

He walked boldly into the bedroom, in which one small night lamp had been lit. The other Martin Morley was there, staring at himself in the mirror, brushing his short hair carefully and smoothing the folds of a dressing gown. Martin's dressing gown.

"O.K.," Martin said. "You get the hell out of here." Mayhem? Yes. Take the imposter back to the little pink creature? Yes. But no violence here in his bedroom with Janet inside, showering.

"You shouldn't have come in here, old boy. You created

quite a disturbance at the party."

"I did? I'm the real item. I'm . . . I don't want to talk about it. Just clear out."

"Really, this is my place."

"Are you going to—"

"No, I'm not. And you're not going to do a thing about it, Martin. From the moment I knocked out that little pink fellow, I've owned the Martin Morley identity as much as you have."

"I'm going to throw you out of here."

"I'm ready for bed, Martin. You're the one who'd better leave."

"I'll give you one minute."

"Listen, old boy. You're behaving like a child. There's no reason why we can't make a good thing out of this if you stop being so melodramatic."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, think of how many times a man would like to be two places at once. He could be home with his wife and entertaining his lover at the same time. He could keep his wife happy and play poker with the boys. He could get his business done in half a day. Why, the possibilities are unlimited."

The little pink creature had mentioned something about psitrons, Martin remembered.

The personality might be altogether different. It was. Martin's double was not immoral, he was amoral.

"... so," he was saying, "I have nothing against you, Martin. I'm prepared to reach an agreement if you are. We'll have to be careful, of course, so that we're not seen at the same place at the same time. Embarrassing, you know. Hard to explain. But we'll get along. We'll make out."

"You'll *get* out!"

"Don't raise your voice, Martin. Janet will hear."

"I don't care if—"

"Martin, you're going to spoil a good thing."

Then that was the way he wanted it. Martin would have to resort to violence right here, right now. He tensed himself and was ready to spring at the other Martin Morley when the shower stopped.

"Quick, Martin!" his double hissed. "Get out of here."

"You get out."

The other Martin Morley smiled at him. "I am not going to move."

Martin could hear his wife humming some bars from the song, *Till They All Go Home*. She sounded happy. The bathroom door opened. Martin bolted for the closet and got inside barely in time.

Then Janet was in the bedroom, dressed in a filmy peignoir. The closet door was open a crack and Martin could see her smiling shyly at the other Martin Morley. "Darling," she said, "all that drinking finally went to my head. Everything is spinning so. . . ."

"Glad we came back from the mountains?"

"I'm happy anyplace as long as we're together. All that spinning. Martin, hold me."

The other Martin Morley held her. "Janet?"

"You're so far away. Jus-lemmegotuhsleep, sleep. . . ."

The other Martin Morley frowned. Martin snickered. Janet had never been able to hold her liquor. She was all right for hours, then suddenly drifted off into a deep sleep from which she could not be stirred. The other Martin Morley shook his fist at the closet and deposited Janet's limp form on the bed, then made his way into the kitchen.

Martin stepped from the closet, walked to the bed, kissed his sleeping wife on the mouth, tucked her in comfortably, and followed his double into the kitchen.

"I'm making her some

black coffee," the other Martin Morley explained.

"It won't do any good. She has to sleep it off; surprised you didn't know."

"Stop being so objective about everything."

"You're the one wanted to be objective a few minutes ago, Martin pointed out.

"But this is my wedding night."

"Last night was our wedding night, and I won't have you talking like that about my wife."

"Then you won't agree to my plan?"

"Never," said Martin.

The other Martin Morley shrugged wearily, then turned abruptly and hurled the coffee pot at Martin. Martin ducked, heard the pyrex pot shatter against the wall, then was grappling with his double. At first it struck him as being very funny—fighting with himself like that. Like a man shadow boxing with the mirror.

Then it wasn't funny. Martin only wanted to subdue his double and return him to the little pink creature in the Adirondacks. Not knowing that such a possibility existed, the other Martin Morley had other ideas. Martin first discovered what they were when his double pushed clear of

him, whirled to one of the cabinet drawers and came away from it brandishing a large bread knife.

"If I can hide the body," panted the other Martin Morley, "no one will ever know you're missing." And he lunged at Martin with the bread knife.

Martin side-stepped him and stuck out a foot. His double went sprawling across the room, but not before the knife had cut a six inch slash in Martin's trousers. Martin was after him at once, pouncing on him before he had a chance to come up wielding the knife again.

Grasping the duplicate ears, Martin began to pound his double's head against the floor. After the fourth thud he had to let go with one hand and fend off the big kitchen knife which was hovering above his shoulder. He twisted the hand that held it until the knife clattered to the floor, but then the other Martin Morley had squirmed out from under and scrambled to his feet.

Martin met him in the center of the kitchen, where they exchanged blows. The same muscles were behind each fist, the same capacity for absorbing punishment received each blow. They stood

that way for the better part of five minutes, clobbering one another.

Martin was thinking: I leave myself wide open when I cross my right. He had done a little boxing in college but had compiled a losing record because of that proclivity. He was feeling weak and dizzy and could hardly stand on his feet. His arms seemed fastened to lead weights which he could hardly lift, but he feinted with his left hand and watched the other Martin Morley lunging awkwardly behind the right cross which the feint summoned. Martin measured him carefully, hooked his left fist to the duplicate jaw, then jabbed it to the belly, then crossed his own right.

Down went the other Martin Morley.

Martin hovered over him, hardly able to stand himself. He smiled and retrieved the bread knife and returned it to the drawer. He was about to congratulate himself when someone said, "Thank you. Thank you very much. That saves me the trouble."

Martin whirled.

Another Martin Morley stood there.

"You see, I was out in the incinerator. When our small pink friend returned to Earth,

I decided I had as much right not to be the specimen as you had."

It was the third Martin Morley, the one which the little pink creature had fashioned after the second Martin Morley had escaped.

Martin gaped at him and staggered back toward the wall, still hardly able to stand. The third Martin Morley crossed the room after him, smiled confidently, and knocked him out with one blow.

"Maybe I'd better put the top up," suggested the third Martin Morley cheerfully. "It's growing light out."

Three quarters of an hour before, they had crossed the Rip Van Winkle Bridge and were heading north toward the Adirondacks. Martin sat in back with the second Martin Morley, both of them bound hand and foot. The third Martin Morley was in front, driving.

"I mean," he went on, "I don't want anyone to see you two back there tied up, and all three of us identical. You know what I mean."

"Just shut up," Martin said miserably. "We're not listening to you."

"You'll be on your way in a little while, two of the best specimens the little pink fellow ever found, I'm sure."

"You see," the second Martin Morley told Martin bitterly. "If you'd agree to co-operate with me, this wouldn't have happened."

The third Martin Morley pulled the lever which unfolded the canvas top of the convertible. The top rose up and over them and soon was secured. They drove in silence, but Martin was grimly aware of the miles flashing by. Within the hour, they would arrive at their rendezvous with the little pink creature. Within minutes after that, Martin Morley and Martin Morley II would be on their way into space. And Martin Morley III, a late comer in the contest, would walk away a free man with no one to question his identity.

"I wish you could take it cheerfully," he said. "We all had an equal chance."

"You never declared yourself," said the second Martin Morley. "You didn't play fair."

"Stop whining."

"I'm not whining."

Martin had no part in the argument. There was a lot he wanted to say to both of them, to both usurpers. Instead, though, he was busy with the ropes which bound his hands behind him. He thought they were looser now than when

he had first regained consciousness on the Taconic State Parkway a couple of hours ago. His wrists were raw and numb but he worked them back and forth methodically, wondering if there was enough friction to fray the ropes sufficiently for him to rip them.

They now were in the foothills of the Adirondacks, and climbing. Soon Martin recognized the road which led east to the Lake George Hotel, but they sped right by and took the next right turn, a two lane blacktop which would take them to the spot where the little pink creature waited for his specimens.

Martin yanked at the ropes which, he found, still held. He rubbed his throbbing wrists back and forth some more, then the spaceship loomed up ahead of them. It was still quite early in the morning. The chances of anyone spotting the spaceship nestled here among the pines off this little used road were slight.

The third Martin Morley pulled the convertible to a stop. "I'm going to unfasten your legs so you can walk," he said, and did so.

Martin's stiff legs tingled with a return of sensation, then the three of them had set off through the pine trees

toward the spaceship. Martin was still sawing his wrists back and forth.

The little pink creature was waiting for them outside the airlock of his spaceship, gesticulating happily with its four small arms. "I was getting nervous, young man," it said. "Especially after the third one got away. Oh, I see you have both."

"I sure do," said the third Martin Morley, and smiled.

"That's a dirty lie," Martin cried. "I'm the original."

"Can you prove it?" the third Martin Morley asked him mildly.

"Well, no."

"Frankly," the little pink creature admitted, "I don't much care which is which. As long as I can leave this planet now with two of you, it will satisfy the District Supervisor. I'll tell you this, though: your Earth gives me the willies. I won't be coming back this way for a long, long time."

Would the rope never break? Martin sawed his wrists across each other desperately as they all walked inside the spaceship.

"You will relax in these acceleration hammocks," the little pink creature was telling Martins I and II. "I'd

better unfasten your arms, and—"

"No!" shrieked the third Martin Morley. "I brought them here for you, but don't untie them until I'm on my way."

Martin waited hopefully, but the pink creature nodded. "That seems fair enough." A series of buttons was pressed. Somewhere deep within the spaceship, a powerful engine throbbed into life, humming and pulsing beneath their feet. "I'm building power," explained the pink creature, "for our dash to the moon. From there, we use star drive."

"I'll be going now," said the third Martin Morley, and headed toward the airlock.

It took a great effort of will to tug his injured wrists apart, but Martin knew it was now or never. Once the third Martin Morley left the spaceship and the airlock was fastened behind him, it would be too late. Goodbye to Earth, forever. Goodbye to the life he knew, to Janet, to the places he loved. He wondered what the zoo would be like.

The third Martin Morley had reached the airlock and was walking through. The ponderous airlock door began to slide shut behind him. Martin sighed.

And suddenly, he felt the ropes parting. A last furious tug freed his wrists completely, and with a wild shout he bolted toward the airclock door.

It was still rolling shut and he didn't know if there was enough room to slip through. He dove head first and for one terrible moment felt the metal closing against his legs. Then he was rolling over and over on the ground. He stood

up, feeling badly shaken.

The third Martin Morley had kicked over the motor of the convertible, its top now down to let in the warm sun, and was now releasing the handbreak. Martin took five running strides and leaped in beside him.

They struggled there. It was an unequal battle because Martin's arms were still numb, but the third Martin Morley had to concentrate on



"I think you'd better read the book again, Mr. Valigursky."

keeping the car straight.

The still slow-moving convertible swerved off the road and crumpled its right front fender against the trunk of a large pine tree.

"Now look what you've done to my car!" cried the third Martin Morley.

One of them opened the door. They rolled outside, wrestling, to the dusty shoulder of the road. Martin was on bottom, pinned. Martin saw his double—his triple—lift a large rock high overhead and bring it down toward his face. Martin twisted his head away and the rock slammed down on the dusty surface inches from his ear.

Then he had squirmed out from under and began to poke his fists at the other Martin Morley's face. But feebly. There was still no power in his forearms. The other Martin Morley had reached up with strong hands and was choking him.

Martin grabbed his own left arm at the elbow with his right hand and used it as a flail, rocking his triple's head back and forth with it. His vision was swimming. He couldn't breathe. He thought his tongue was hanging out. He flailed his numb left hand up and down, up and down, with the numb fingers clench-

ed into a fist, but not feeling.

Five minutes later he was dragging the unconscious Martin Morley III back to the spaceship.

"I don't care which one," the little pink creature pleaded. "One of you. Either one."

Martin stood back and watched the spaceship take off with his two doubles safely inside. Specimens leading somewhere.

Much later, Martin returned to his New York apartment.

"I was frantic worrying," Janet said, after they had kissed. "You didn't leave a note or anything."

"Personal business," Martin said mysteriously, and gave her a real kiss.

"Martin. Martin, you've changed somehow since we're married. For a time it was like, like you were two different men or something. Now, well, you're both of them. Yes, you're like both of them wrapped into one. I like you better this way, darling."

It was almost night again. This time, Martin promised himself, there would be no party and no doubles.

There was something wonderful about being the only Martin Morley.

THE END

The *Naked* People

By WINSTON MARKS

It was tough enough, Foster thought, winning a gal like Kelly when he could judge competition. But she was falling for a no-good bum who didn't exist!

OH, THEY'RE careful, all right, these polarized ones. They can't allow too many incidents, or first thing you know there would be a "cult" spring up based on a belief in them—scientific pooh-poohing notwithstanding—and this might eventually lead to their undoing.

But they tend to be careless in little things.

You lay a book down, open to page 128. You come back, and it's closed, or open to a different page.

Or you remember a cigarette you left burning, and you get up out of bed and go into the living room to rub it out—but it's gone. Not burned out. Gone!

You turn off a faucet, tightly. Turn your back, and it's dripping again. They'll

even snitch the last piece of candy from a plate, trusting to our rotten memories and mistrust of each other to account for the discrepancy.

But in the big things they're careful. Did you ever wake up in the morning feeling "used?" Maybe you can recall a dream, and maybe you can't. It doesn't make any difference. Never will you see them or actually feel them. Their concentration is complete, and their mind-domination is overwhelming when they turn to their lustier activities.

I suppose they have been with us since time began, keeping us just enough off balance to assure we will never put two and two together.

Except for a very curious



"She can't see me," he said. "She thinks you're crazy!"

streptococcus infection and the blessing of the new antibiotics that pulled me through, their secret should never have fallen into my hands. But it did.

I came to in a hospital bed, weak and still burning with fever. The special nurse briefed me on my condition. I had been unconscious for a week, with temperatures up in the critical zone constantly. They had given me up three days before, but for some reason my young body had kept breathing, and finally, the anti-biotics had won out.

Then my memory came back. A young intern had no business brawling in a bar, especially with a nasty infection under one ear. I remembered vaguely the argument over the female bar-fly, and the huge, red-headed salesman who swung one at me from back in the shadows. And I remembered trying to duck and not succeeding. Mercifully, my memory didn't record the pain when his rock-like fist smashed my skull just under my sore ear and sent the infection charging into my brain and all through my blood system. My head just exploded, and that was all.

Now I looked at the nurse, and I could see she was studying me carefully for signs of mental impairment. "Looks like I'll make it all right, now, huh?" I asked her.

She smiled, "You'll be fine, doctor." But she was pressing the call button by my side, pressing it in a rhythmic motion that I knew was a signal to the desk to send in a physician.

She was a cute little trick. I suppose the common old phenomenon of the patient's attraction to his nurse was working on me from the first, but even in my condition it was most pleasant to regard her clean features, black hair and blue, sympathetic eyes. While we waited for the doctor to come I took in what else of her that showed above the bed, and it was all well worth attention.

She noticed my gaze and grinned. "You're much too sick for that," she said.

And she was right. I tried to raise my head to prove something or other, and discovered I was largely paralyzed—not rigid or numb, just sunk in a warm mud-bath of weakness that defied my volition to contract the larger muscles.

My brain and eyes felt seared from the long temper-

ature siege, and a faint pink filter seemed to tint my eyesight. The nurse moistened my cracked lips with a few drops of water, and I licked them with my cotton tongue.

She still looked good to me. "Your name?" I asked.

"Kelly," she said, and her eyes crinkled at me. What makes these girls so damned attractive when you look up at them from between the sheets, instead of down at them when they work alongside you with someone else between the sheets?

I was still reflecting on this when Dr. Bain came in.

I thought I was seeing double as he stepped toward me, but the faint image behind him separated itself and moved to the foot of my bed, leaned an elbow on the white cross-member and stared at my lucious nurse.

The action, informal as it was, was not what amazed me most. The form was obviously a ghost of some kind! I could see right through its naked, pink body. It was a human form, bald, paunchy and undisputably masculine, and the flabby, jeweled face had the most lacivious look on it I have ever seen in daylight.

Bain had ahold of my wrist

and was saying, "Coming around, eh, Foster? You had a close one, my boy. How do you feel?"

I knew Bain slightly. He was a good man, fortyish, efficient and a most practical-minded diagnostician. "Until just now," I told him, "I thought everything was going to be just great."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

I said, "I felt quite rational until you came in, but at the moment I'm a little confused. Do I look like an elephant—do I?"

Bain kept his eyebrows level and shook his head. "Why?"

"Because I seem to be seeing pink men," I told him. "Down there at the foot of my bed."

I didn't expect anyone in the room to be especially impressed with my statement, but one individual was. *The pink man.*

For the first time he turned his depraved, little eyes on me and they grew twice their size. His loose-lipped mouth opened an inch with astonishment. Then he stared from me to the doctor to Kelly, studying their reactions to my statement. Apparently he found them satisfying, because he seemed to.

relax and return his lewd gaze to my nurse, Kelly.

Neuro-psychiatry being my planned specialty, I was well-versed in the lore of mental aberrations and hallucinations, but my first subjective look at a phantom was shockingly disturbing.

Dr. Bain returned my wrist to me gently. "You'll be lucky if that's all you see, Dr. Foster. That brain of your has taken one of the worst drubbings I've ever seen. I'll be quite frank with you, doctor. We are very suspicious of permanent tissue damage. I wouldn't tell this to a lay patient, but you seem objective enough to help us—I mean, about reporting your hallucinations. Of course, your ability to identify them, as such, holds out great promise that the damage isn't severe."

In other words, a mental patient who recognizes his own symptoms is, normally, on the way to overcoming them.

The behavior of my pink intruder, however, was most upsetting, and I couldn't share Dr. Bain's confidence in my condition. This naked joker had followed nurse Kelly over to the corner where she was fussing with

a hypo, and he was breathing down her neck with disgusting intimacy.

Kelly was standing in front of the dresser which had a large mirror in front of it. I noticed her look up once and adjust her white cap in the mirror. If my phantom had any visible substance to him, she couldn't have missed seeing his image behind her.

But she merely returned, rolled me over on my stomach, stripped down the covers and sank the needle into my bed sore buttocks without comment.

The motion disturbed my inner-ear equilibrium, the room went flip-flop and I blacked out before she removed the hypo.

It was late, judging from the darkness and diminished sounds that came from the corridors. I opened my eyes wide for the second time. Kelly was dozing in a chair by the window.

Apparently, I had slipped from unconsciousness into a normal sleep, because I felt a bit more rested. I wondered what had awakened me.

A crackling rustle to my left brought my staring eyes bulging until the sockets ached.

The pink phantom was right at my elbow, pawing

through a huge box of chocolates, against which a plain card was propped. It read, "Get well, Foster—from the staff."

What sent the terror racing through my feeble body was the fact that the pink man appeared quite solid now. I could see nothing through him, and as I watched he selected a large chocolate cream and popped it into a very substantial looking mouth.

He chomped it, licked his lips and then faded almost from view. Now I could see the window shade right through him as he moved over and regarded Kelly's relaxed form. He stepped to the door, which was slightly ajar, listened, then carefully closed it. I realized that he had suddenly solidified as he touched the door. Turning away he became shadowy, barely visible in the soft glow of my night-light.

He moved toward nurse Kelly, now, and a low *thrumming* beat into my brain, increasing like the approach of humming-bird's wings. Somehow it was peaceful, soporific. Now he was down on one knee staring into her face and growing solid again.

My lids grew heavy even as my brain shrieked a com-

mand at my vocal chords, a command that was disregarded. Through my closing lashes I saw him get slowly to his feet, lifting her by the armpits. He had her in his arms, now, and her white hands came up behind his neckless head which tipped down. Her body tensed to him as his big obscene mouth closed over hers. Then I screamed silently and whirled down a long, spiral tunnel of blackness with the echoes of my insane gibbering ringing in my brain.

When I awakened it was to the sound of Kelly's stirring. I opened my eyes in time to see her lift her cramped neck from the back of the straight chair. She was still sprawled out, sitting on the edge of her spine, and she drew in her shapely legs gingerly. Dawn squeezed pale streaks of light through the cracks on either side of the curtain, and Kelly's lovely, young face had a drawn, tired look.

I tried to shout but only managed to gag and glub. She rocked to her feet instantly, took a staggering step to my side and felt my pulse.

"G'morning!" she said thickly, blinking her eyes, which widened a little as my

hammering heart registered on her finger tips.

She let me sip some water from a bent tube stuck in a glass. Her cool hand touched my forehead, but her fingers felt heavy and clumsy.

"Are you all right?" I gasped when my throat was moist once more.

"Me?"

"Yes, you! The pink man—he—he—"

A tired smile plucked at her lips. "So he's back?"

"No, he's gone now," I said. "But he—"

Hell, it was senseless! If she didn't remember what the naked devil had done to her it was a cinch I couldn't convince her, but I tried.

"He was here again," I told her. "And I don't think it was any dream."

Her eyes tightened with concern and sympathy. "These things can seem very real, I know," she said. "I had malaria once."

"Listen," I hissed. "Wasn't the door open when you sat down over there?"

"Why, yes. We always leave it—"

"It's closed now."

She looked at it. "A little draft, I suppose."

Suddenly, I became aware that the pink man was with us again—if, indeed, he had

been gone at all. Kelly stood between me and the window. "Pinky" was on the other side of the bed, to my right. And a split second *before* Kelly had said, "A little draft, I suppose," the very same words had flashed into my brain. Her statement had come like a verbal echo of a thought I had had by myself.

I became desperate. "The box of candy," I said. "Look in the box. There's a piece gone—and I'm still quite helpless as you can see. I saw the pink man take that piece of candy. Look and see. Please!"

To humor me she lifted the lid, peered in and looked puzzled for a minute.

Then the thought flashed into my brain, "One of those thieving orderlies sneaked in here while I dozed off."

Nurse Kelly scowled. "One of those thieving orderlies sneaked in here while I dozed off," she said with annoyance.

My eyes swung back to my right, and Pinky stood there glancing from me to Kelly, his hands behind his back, eyebrows arched slightly and his lips pooched out like Winston Churchill's when he has just dropped an oratorical pearl.

I wanted to smash the self-

satisfied, unworried look from his insolent, bestial features. I couldn't do more than wiggle my toes.

It was hopeless.

"Would you like a piece?"

Kelly was saying, tilting up the open box so I could see the selection of pale and dark chocolates, some wrapped in red foil, others in silver. "It will be an hour before breakfast."

I closed my eyes and sighed helplessly. "You think I'm nuts, Kelly, but he's standing right beside me at this minute. I think he—he made love to you last night."

I heard her drop the box on the table and take a step backwards. When I looked she had a "my-God-I-do-feel-funny-expression" on her face.

She was off guard for such an outrageous statement, and, apparently, so was Pinky, because it was long seconds of silence before the thought beat into my brain, "Brother, this boy is worse than we figured."

Kelly drew her lax features together and said, "Brother, you are in different shape than we figured. I don't know whether it's better or worse." She tried the tired smile again, but there was no doubt in my mind now what was

happening. Pinky was pulling her thoughts around like the limbs of a puppet.

She squared away her little white cap, took my temperature and went to get my morning wash basin. Pinky started to follow her out the door, but he stopped and came back when I whispered, "Come here, you pink bastard!"

He waddled over to me, looking ponderous yet impalpable. He seemed to be at maximum attenuation, or minimum viscosity. His eyes bored into mine. "So you were still awake last night?" he said to me without moving his lips.

"Who—what are you?" I demanded, my anger driving my fear and doubts of my sanity from my mind.

"A figment of your hot little brain," he said.

"The hell you are!"

I said it with such conviction that I could read a trace of dismay and concern in his puffy face. Then his eyes tightened, and I could feel a faint prodding in my head as if he were fingering my medulla. The prodding little pokes became more and more severe, but somehow he seemed to be unable to penetrate.

"This is ridiculous," he

said, as if to himself. "You can read me, but I can't read you."

"That's tough," I said aloud so he could hear me.

He ignored me. "Must be scar tissue, semi-permeable. *Afferently* sensitive but *efferently* opaque. Never heard of such a thing!" he concluded, eyeing me with deep, crooked wrinkles in his low forehead.

"What are you?" I demanded again.

"Hmmm," he said. Then he raised his head and emitted a shrill screech of mental energy that must have aroused every telepath in the county. A moment later a tall female figure, round-shouldered and saggy, slipped through the door looking a little more solid, a little less pink, but just as naked.

"What's the matter," she demanded snappishly. "It better be important! I was just—" Her lips didn't move either.

"Never mind," he said looking her over churlishly. Her stringy red hair lay damp and tangled on her shoulders, and her eyes lighted momentarily as she looked over at me."

"Big, isn't he? Puny in the face, though."

The vaporous man an-

nounced, "He can see us, and he can hear every word you think. We have a problem."

Instantly, the female faded to a faint outline, but I caught the look of apprehension before her face became confused to my bleary eyes.

"He can hear loose thoughts?" she asked quaveringly.

"He can. What's more, I can't get anything from his mind. You try it. I'm a little tired."

She took a step forward. "Sure," she said, and I felt more little nudges in my brain, only they were sharp, taloned stabs that threatened to tear aside my remarkable but fragile protection.

I snarled, "Get your filthy hooks out of me."

And at that moment Kelly came in with my basin of warm water. The two phantoms didn't even step aside. They let the nurse pass right through them. She came to me swiftly, setting down the enameled pan so quickly it sloshed on the night-stand.

"Take it easy, doctor," she implored. "Try not to give in to these—these ideas."

I fell silent. In her place I would feel the same alarm for a patient I found talking back to his hallucinations. Suddenly I began to wonder

how many patients of mine had really been sweating out this same situation, while I stood by and murmured inanities and sympathetic clucks!

The pink ones looked me over thoughtfully and both left through the door without disturbing the hinges. Kelly finished my bath and turned me over to the day nurse, a dumpy little peroxide blonde.

"He's raving a little, but he's still too weak to move around," Kelly said. She stopped at the door and gave me her own idea of a prescription, a sexy wink. Under other circumstances this would have dragged me back to reality right now, but I was already too painfully deep in my private realities, and secondly, her tired eyes didn't manage as much sex in the wink as she thought.

The blonde was just a floor nurse, not a special. She checked on me frequently during the day, but I was alone an hour at a time. Apparently I was over the hump. I managed to suck a liquid breakfast and consume a soft lunch, which the unpretty blonde spooned into me. And I even managed a chocolate in the afternoon.

As my strength gradually

came back I napped less. During my waking moments I kept sweeping the room with fearful eyes, awaiting the re-appearance of the pink ones.

Just after visiting hours were over, my vigilance was rewarded. With the sunlight streaming in I wouldn't have noticed the very thin pinkness of the female phantom, if I hadn't been staring right at the white door when she sauntered through it.

I was almost grateful to her for showing up. I had about convinced myself that my brain was indeed impaired, but now my certainty rose that what had happened was real.

She eyed the closed door behind her, then let herself flesh out into complete opacity, as she seated herself on the edge of my bed. The mattress sagged with her materialized substance, and I knew now that either I was completely insane, or my visitor was a unique but genuine article.

Her hair looked better. It was brushed and wrapped around and piled high on her head like pictures of Psyche. She appeared to have had some rest, and her beady eyes were restless as they roved over me and examined my face.

I wanted no more misunderstandings from the hospital staff, so I kept my voice low. "What are you? What do you want with me?"

Her lower lip was full but pale. It twitched as she enunciated words in my brain. "Open up your mind so I can feel it, honey," she said with a sensuous quiver and a voluptuousness that belied her bony frame. She sagged down over my helpless body and touched my face with clammy fingers.

"Gettahellout before I scream," I said.

"Relax, honey. You're on to us now, so we gotta be friends."

I closed my eyes, and that shut out her naked, revolting figure—proving that the whole thing wasn't originating in my mind.

I didn't pretend to understand it, but I figured I'd better learn all I could.

"Okay, so we're buddies,"

I said, trying to keep the nausea out of my voice. "I can't open my brain to you. I guess the thing that let's me see and hear you is the same thing that closes my thoughts to you."

She looked thoughtful. "That's the idea Rolyx has about you. Well," she sighed,

"it's a pity. We can't get very intimate this way."

"Yeah," I said, "it's a pity. Now fill me in, will you? Who are you? Where are you from?"

"I'm Aljor," she said touselling my hair with a long finger. "I hang around the hospital. Me and Rolyx."

"Why?"

"We like it here, that's all. More variety. Most of us like to move in with private families—better food. But it gets monotonous, same old faces alla time. Give me an institution or a hotel every time."

I simply couldn't convince myself I was talking to a *ghost*. I tried once more. "What—*what* are you?"

Her pink, loose face turned a deeper shade as she obviously took offense. "Whad-da ya mean, what am I? I'm *me*, Aljor?"

"From where?"

"From—from around!" she snapped. She wrinkled her forehead pettishly at her own inability to comprehend and answer my simple questions. "How would you like it if I asked you *what you were* and what rock *you* crawled out of?" she said in a hurt manner.

"But—you're different, you must admit that," I said.

"Of course I'm different from you. I'm a girl!"

"I don't mean your sex—I mean fading in and out."

"Oh, that," she said flatly. "You know, I ain't used to sittin' here talkin' to an *opie* in broad day light like this, with your eyes wide open."

"Opie?" I asked, "what's an opie?"

"That's you. Your kind," she said.

"All right," I said in exasperation, "so I'm an *opie*—I suppose that stands for opaque. Now, what is your kind, and where did your kind come from?"

"My kind? Why—we—we're the other kind. We been around a long time. How do I know where we come from? Where did *your* kind come from? Ask Rolyx. He's smarter than me."

It was a stupid answer, but the implication floored me.

"Well, how do you do this disappearing act?"

She thought a minute. "You got it backwards. The hard part is *not disappearing*. Our natural condition is to be polarized. We're born that way. We have to work at disrupting this polarity in order to be solid like your kind. The second we relax, boing! back we go. It ain't fun."

"Why not?"

"We got to depolarize ourselves to eat and—and—" she leered at me, "—and everything." We risk discovery every time we do it. That's why we mess around at night mostly."

"What do you do—for a living, I mean? What kind of work?"

"We don't work," she said with a silly smile. "We—just sort of live offa you people. You're the lucky ones, solid alla time without even tryin'."

Parasites! I shrank from the thought. "You mean you steal our food and live in our houses?"

"Shore. Why not? We don't bother much. Don't take much to feed us, and it's mostly left-overs. We don't dare snitch much fresh stuff or people would notice it."

She read the disgust and loathing that must have shown on my face, because she leaned over me again. "Now, don't be upset, honey. We're harmless. We don't hurt nobody none."

Her breath was dry and cold in my nostrils. I tried to turn my head away, but my feeble neck muscles would not respond. Just when I thought she would glom my

mouth with her loose lips she pulled back quickly.

"How can a girl kiss a guy with an expression like that? Ya damned snob! No wonder the legend says, never give an *opie* a waking chance! Ya think you're so much better than we are! Well, you just wait! Just wait until you're stronger!"

She faded into a pink mist again, and her weight eased from the springs even before she slipped off and stalked through the door.

Kelly came on duty at eight that evening to special me through the night. I had decided to say nothing to her about my "visions." There was no longer a shred of doubt as to my sanity—in my own mind. But I realized the impossibility of convincing the hospital staff of this if I continued to insist that I was sceeing pink men and women in my room.

Around ten, Kelly spooned a late snack of soft diet into me and acted so sweet I started to get another attack of patient-nursitis. But even as I began to consider how lovely and desirable she was, my body went rigid with the thought of what happened to her last night. My protective instinct began to bristle.

When she tucked me in I

closed my eyes, but I was determined to keep watch over her. I was too weak. I dropped off within an hour and didn't awaken until it was time for my morning ablutions.

She seemed fresher this morning. Maybe Rolyx hadn't shown up after all. Probably afraid of me or self-conscious. I smiled at Kelly and she smiled back. "No more pink men?" she asked quietly.

"No more pink men," I said reaching for her hand without thinking. My arm moved, and I almost made it!

My strength returned rapidly after that. The pink people failed to show up for three days, and the fourth night, Kelly had to move rather nimbly to prevent me from overextending my strength and to preserve her professional dignity.

They were feeding me meat now, and I had consumed the whole box of chocolates. I kept track of them, and apparently neither Rolyx nor Aljor had been in even to snatch a sweet.

It was costing me to keep Kelly on as a special nurse, but I had requested it when they told me I was out of danger. I explained to her that she'd have to wait a bit for her money, being as how

interns are, to put it conservatively, underpaid. But darned if she didn't stay on anyway. I don't think she was quite convinced that I was over my little pink man business.

Anyway, this night I was feeling strong and wide awake. At midnight, I took pity on Kelly and feigned sleep. I had been deliberately napping all I could in the daytime so I could keep a better watch at night, and this night it paid off.

It was about one o'clock in the morning when two things happened that snapped my eyes open. I felt a weight sink on the bed beside me, and the *thrumming* beat into my brain. This time I was stronger, and it did no more than make me sleepy. Anyway, the sight of Aljor's long, unlovely figure sagging over me was more than enough to counteract the narcotic effect of the *thrumming*. I tried to sit up, but her hand pushed me back gently.

She whispered, "Relax, honey. It's only me."

A wild scheme formed in my mind. Maybe I *could* betray her presence to Kelly and convince the nurse that I hadn't been having hallucinations. I composed my face

and whispered back, "I'm relaxed. What've you got in mind?"

A broad, loose-lipped grin spread over her face, and I felt her weight sink more deeply into the springs as she became fully depolarized and "flesh-born."

"Just a little kiss," she said. Her eyes glittered.

She leaned closer. I could feel the chill of her breath before I stopped her. I said, "Just a moment—honey. My throat is dry."

I rolled slowly to my side and reached for the glass of water on the night-stand. My eyes slipped over to where Kelly should have been nodding in her chair. She was on her feet, and Rolyx was just bending his bare, bullet-head down to hers!

Then I realized that the *thrumming* had come from him, not Aljor! They were working—or playing—as a team. Rolyx was taking no chances with Kelly. He had her deep in the hypnotic trance, her hands slipping up behind his ugly neck.

But Aljor seemed to be taking some perverse pleasure in finding me awake and apparently ready for her.

I yelled, "Kelly, wake up!" and I threw the contents of

my waterglass in her direction.

Instantly, the *thrumming* jumped a million decibals, emitting now, from Aljor. And I discovered what it was to have it *directed at me*. A billion humming birds hovered in my skull.

I don't remember hitting the pillow, but I must have barely passed out before both pink creatures disappeared. My eyes popped open and I was wide awake.

Kelly was standing up, her head slanted side ways, eyes like poker chips, and arms draped around a shoulder-high chunk of air. Her lithe form moved sensuously for a moment, then she froze and stood stiff.

She dropped her arms and squawked, "What goes 'on here?" She looked down at her disheveled uniform, the wet floor and the glass in my limp hand.

It was plain she had no idea of our visitation, and it would be worse than useless to try to explain.

"You were dreaming," I said flatly. "Sleep-walking. I tossed the water to wake you up."

Comprehension dawned on her, and she swallowed my story. "Oh, me!" she exhaled.

"I'll say I was dreaming. I dreamed that—"

Then she looked at me with the damndest expression.

I said, "You dreamed what?"

"Never mind," she said blushing, taking the empty glass from my fingers and refilling it from the pitcher. "Now go to sleep."

Her lips trembled a little, and for some reason I chose this moment to ask a question I knew was inevitable. "Miss Kelly," I said formally, "When I get out of bedpan alley will you do me the honor to become my bride?"

She was still fighting for control over herself. She poured the water back into the pitcher, carefully set the glass down as though it were brimming full and said, "Why yes. Why do you ask? I mean—I think—huh?—how did you?—darnit, I'm confused! Would you repeat the question?"

This time I had enough strength to reach out and grasp her nearest hand. I said, "Kelly, I'm crazy about you. Would you consider marrying a punk intern and helping him shoo the pink people away?"

"The pink people," she said with a faint shudder. Then she focussed her eyes on me.

Her smile was real and warm, but she said, "You know as well as I do, proposals don't count until ten days after discharge."

Maybe some marriages are made in heaven, but I'll bet more are made in hospitals. I was so tail-over-teakettle in love with that girl by the time they pronounced me cured that I guess it must have rubbed off on her.

Financially, it would have been wiser to wait awhile until the end of my internship, but the deeper I fell in love the more jealous I became. The thought of Rolyx or any other polarized pink bastard having his way with her drove me almost insane.

So we were married.

For months after our honeymoon I looked forward to the time when I could trap one of the pink creatures to show to Kelly—her first name

is Timotheene—so I could confide in her the whole way. A man shouldn't have secrets from his wife.

But it doesn't look like it's going to work out. I don't dare bring up the subject without proof, and the pink people, outside one's own home, are the very devil to try to catch in solidified form.

The one around our house?

No, it would never do to try to play tricks on *her*. She's a mischievous little blonde, and she could make life miserable for both of us if I offended *her*.

At least, that's the way I see it.

She's a cute little parasite, so pretty, in fact, that the occasional pink male visitors we have never look twice at Kelly.

And after all, she eats so very little—

THE END



► *Don't rush to the nearest psychiatrist when you get that lonely feeling. It's only natural—when you remember that the average population density of Earth is only 47 persons per square mile.*

...and throw away the key

BY WIN KINNEY

If you think convicts have it tough these days, wait'll you learn what will happen in the future. Then a guy will be forced to battle Nature just to stay locked up!

THE drug left Rufe more slowly. They must really have slugged him with it.

For minutes the voices had sounded in his ears, but only now did he open his eyes and peer into the gloom.

The others were jammed around the single port. "That's all I see. Just water."

"Wait. Over there. It's land."

"Sure. They wouldn't bring us this far to drop us in the drink."

Rufus Ingram staggered to his feet and moved toward the knot of men. Someone said, "It's an island. A big one. You can see water on the other side, too."

He shuffled toward them, dirt gritting under his feet on the filthy deck-plate. Towering a head over the tallest

of them, he began peeling them away by the neck, the arm, the hair or whatever he touched.

They cursed him, but he elbowed in and jammed his flat face against port. It was smeared from greasy noses. There was the island, green surrounded by earth-like blue waters. As the ship came in he could see the yellow glare of sand and the white surf line.

There were low crude buildings at wide intervals along the beach as far as he could see to left and right. They were too high to make out more.

A voice slobbered in his ear. "Christ, we aren't stopping on the beach! And look at that jungle!"

True, they moved inland,



They fought frantically to release him.

deeper and deeper until they approached the middle of the island. The ship hove to, and hovered. Rufe had a glimpse of a clearing below, just as the arrested motion spilled them about like dice in a crap cup.

They were at several thousand feet, when the deck rasped aside under them and they dropped—ten, fifteen feet into a net. It had small mesh, and the ends whipped together over the eighteen of them, so they plunged like a bag of tangled shrimp until the parachute opened with a bruising jar.

Rufe was on the bottom when they landed, and the shock knocked him senseless. When he came to, the net was torn open, and he, alone, was still prostrate. The others stood around staring at the near rim of the jungle and the orange sun.

The ship was nowhere in sight.

So this was exile! His drugged brain accepted the fact even as he raged internally at the rank hypocrisy of the society that considered itself too civilized to tolerate capital punishment.

He raised to an elbow and took his first real look at his recent shipmates. Somehow,

when he had chosen exile instead of the more widely accepted psycho-null, he had neglected to consider the others, the others who would be the self-decanted scum of Earth's undesirables.

For centuries Earth had taken pride in the disappearance of the penal abbatoir, thereby bringing their codes of punishment into a labored consistency with their dearly held Commandment, Thou Shalt Not Kill.

Instead, he reflected, they offered their outcasts the choice of personality extinction or relegation to this human garbage pail. This, then, was the refuse dump, but in his own mind he was no part of the debris. To the contrary, he was proud of his efficient police record of ridding society of these same moral weaklings, these twisted mentalities with whom he was now lumped and discarded.

He got to his feet and looked at the red-tinged orb. It would be mid-afternoon—or mid-morning—in that position on Earth.

Then he looked at the jungle. At a hundred yards it invited him to its coolness. His red hair was thin, and the sun was hot on his head. The air was heavy with humidity.

He moved toward the foliage.

"Hey, you! We better stick together."

Rufe didn't turn. He knew none of them, was interested in knowing none of them. Here as on Earth, Rufe would mingle with no crowds. He was a loner.

"I said, wait up, you big, dumb bastard!"

He broke his stride. Looking around, he saw he was being overtaken by one of the nameless convicts in the gray sweat-clothes such as he wore himself. He stopped and faced his pursuer. He was shorter but barrel-chested, and he swaggered like a space-port stevedore foreman. His forehead and jaw bulged pugnaciously, fringed with matted, black hair and beard to match.

Rufe said hoarsely, "What is on your mind?"

"The jungle looks rugged. We better stick together, at least until we work out to the coast. Uh, my name is Marco Webb, if you give a damn!" He put out his right hand.

"All right, you stick together." Rufe whirled and started for the jungle again, ignoring the extended hand.

A hand jerked at his shoulder. Rufe, without turning, reached back with his

opposite hand, grabbed the wrist, stooped sharply and slammed the heavy body down to the parched soil in front of him. It was a simple judo throw, but a vicious one.

Rufe kicked him once in the head, then he turned and yelled at the others who had trailed after him. "Don't mess around!" His voice was flat and contemptuous.

It hurt his throat to speak. It was dry, and now he realized how thirsty he was. He recalled no feeding during the long trip, and he felt the pain of hunger now. He broke into a stiff-legged trot. There would be something to eat in all that green.

The detail of the vegetation revealed itself. It was lush but not so thick that a man couldn't walk between the towering boles. It looked very different from the pine forests of the west coast or the Everglades in Florida, the only places Rufe had come in contact with terrestrial nature.

Rufe was spawned of the city, so it was of slight interest to him that the leaves here all seemed flat and huge and tended to round and elliptical shapes.

They bore fruit, and that was all that concerned him at

the moment. He reached for a low-hanging, purplish thing that looked like a ripe plum except it was large as a grapefruit.

He stripped it from the short stem, squeezed it, bit into it and found it filled with a thin pulp. The juice was tart, but he drank it greedily. It mushed up in his hands and the liquid ran down his red whiskers staining his shirt pink.

A thin voice said, "Maybe it's poisonous."

"Know a better way to find out?" Rufe sucked some more, spit out the small seeds and fibrous pulp and looked contemptuously at the skinny man who had followed him in spite of his warning.

The air was breathlessly still, and their voices sounded muffled and dead. The sound-killing carpet of spongy, rotting vegetation had a faint, sweet mustiness underlying a dozen alien, vagrant scents emanating from the mixed growths. The "plum" tree had a slightly acrid odor, not unpleasant, but sharp.

Rufe's awareness gradually increased as the effects of the drug wore off. The heat, the smells, the silence and the itchy humidity—the straggling group of men, their

bleached faces taking a golden tinge from the over-ripe sun; these slowly took on reality for the big redhead.

The thin man blinked owlishly. He looked like he must be accustomed to heavy lenses, but he wore none. He was about forty, lean except for a small paunch. Like the others, his pallid skin told that he was from the cities of Earth. His beard was salted with gray.

"I suppose not," he answered thickly. "How does it taste?"

"That depends on how thirsty you are." Rufe looked back at the others who were approaching the jungle timidly.

There were none of his kind among them. Bunch of petty criminals, three-time losers, he guessed. Like himself, they were stripped clean of possessions except the pocketless, two-piece garments they wore. They had nothing he wanted, and they could only be a liability to him.

"What are you all milling around here for?" he bawled at them.

They stood staring from him to the plum tree. Then he noticed the broad-shouldered fellow he had thrown. He

came limping through the others, slightly doubled over. A skinned bruise purpled one cheek, and his eyes bore into Rufe's as he came up to him.

"What kind of a god-damned maniac are *you*, anyway?"

Rufe drew back his arm and threw the soggy, deflated plum pulp in the man's face. "You again!" He squared away with his legs apart. "Don't ever put your hands on me."

The short man stared at him for a minute then turned to the others. "He's insane. Leave him alone."

Somebody whimpered, "I'm thirsty, Marco."

The heavy, squat man, looked down at the bluish pulp that had dropped from his face. "Better wait a bit and see how this fruit affects big shot here."

The others ignored Marco and moved into the trees picking the juicy fruit. Rufe curled his lip at him.

Marco waited, watching Rufe with a cold curiosity. The owlish individual sucked at a plum and came over to the two larger men. "Marco, I'm Len Purney, forgery. I'd like to team up with you."

"Sure. That's what I was trying to tell Red, here, when he popped a tube. We'd bet-

ter all stick together. God knows what's in that brush."

Rufe was finishing his second plum. "The name is Rufe, not Red. I'm here for murder, since we're making introductions. Yes, murder," he repeated, when several heads turned toward him big-eyed.

The man who called himself Len blinked at him. "You seem godawful proud of it," Marco said.

"I am trying to get across," Rufe said with heavy patience, "that I don't want any part of you. If you all like company so well why didn't you stay on Earth?"

"I didn't like the choice," Marco said.

"That's what I figured," Rufe said. "No guts! Afraid to let them rinse out your putrid little brain and start over. Still, you can't stand on your own feet out here. You want to move around like a pack of rats. All right, do it, but stay out of my way."

Len squinted, trying to get a better picture of the violent giant. He said quietly, "Hell, Rufe, there's other reasons a man doesn't want to put his—his sense of identity on the chopping block. I think we've all got something to live for, things we don't want to for-

get. Who wants to start out as a baby all over, especially when you're past forty like me?"

Rufe's own revulsion at the thought was deep, yet he could feel no kinship or sympathy with these fellow exiles.

His refusal to concede dependency on others was part of the cold, hard, atheistic core of him. Bred in the slums of Old Chicago, happiness was a simple thing to him. It was the negation of misery, a full belly, reasonable comfort, a few dollars and a woman now and then. He needed no help to get these.

In the crowded culture of Earth, his ox-like strength was a wasted resource. His brutality in his police work had yielded only rare moments of the physical pleasure of domination.

On Earth the challenge to survive was pitifully inadequate. Rufe had the deepest contempt for the misfits and weaklings that mankind had paid him to shelter and protect, and encouraged to breed more of their kind.

He was his own man, his own god—and rather than submit to the brain-wash, he would chance being his own executioner, by choosing what

was considered on Earth to be virtual extinction.

Conditions on the penal planet were carefully kept from Earth-Society, and it was generally considered that they must be too horrible to reveal. This accounted for the relatively few convicts who had chosen deportation instead of brain treatment in the past 250 years.

Marco was still staring at him. "You know, you look more like a cop than a con. That judo hold you threw on me, and that kick when I was flat on my back—yeah, I think you were a cop." He said it with a quiet contempt. "The kind of a cop who likes to slap little people around."

Several gray, bearded figures had gathered behind Marco, and Rufe appraised them with a practiced eye. Together they could jump him and kill him. But they wouldn't. He knew their kind.

Marco's insolence was nothing to Rufe. Being despised was a normal condition to him. As a plain-clothes lieutenant, hate and fear had been part of his pay in the dives and petty gambling parlors of his beat.

Without answering he turned his back and moved off into the jungle. He had gone only a few paces when

a choking sound and shouts of dismay swung him back.

A youngster of about 24 was standing spraddle-legged, retching and clawing at his mouth from which streamers of slime from the pink plum pulp dangled.

No one was making a move to help him. Even Marco was seized with paralysis, at the man's bulging eyes, and as Rufe came back, the victim's face was turning dark.

Marco said, "I told you that stuff might be dangerous."

To spite Marco, Rufe moved to the youngster just as his knees buckled. He made a fist and shot a short punch just under the man's diaphragm.

The mouth gaped wide as stomach and lungs erupted. It seemed to clear both esophagus and windpipe, for after a minute he undoubled from the ground, breathing in shallow gasps and gradually lost his dark look.

Rufe, meanwhile, was examining the fruit the kid had been eating. It looked like what all of them had drunk from, but the fibers were slightly tougher, the seeds smaller.

Marco was watching, too. He commented, "Seeds are smaller. Must be green fruit."

Rufe dropped it to the ground and moved off again wordlessly. He must remember to check for ripeness. It *would* be easy to strangle on the stuff.

After some twenty yards the foliage closed in heavily overhead, casting a heavy gloom. It was impossible to walk a straight line because of the irregular clumps of trees and vegetation.

He stopped and tried to judge his bearing by the shadows, but the diffusion was complete. How could a man stride a steady bearing with no sky, no sun, no reference points?

Turning to retrace his steps he found himself already confused. He had to crouch low to find his own foot-marks in the soft rubble of vegetable ruck. In a minute he picked up the voices of the others. They came almost directly from his right.

In the space of twenty yards he had curved off 60 degrees from a straight bearing!

The men were gathered in a rough circle around Len and Marco. Len stopped talking as Rufe stepped out of the foliage. He squinted at the ex-cop. "Back so soon?"

Marco added, "You're smarter than I thought."

Rufe welcomed the sunlight again, but he regarded the men with distaste. He plunged past them and stalked along the perimeter of the clearing searching for a thinner spot to penetrate the jungle. The whole field was less than a quarter-mile in circumference. It had appeared from the ship to be in the center of the island, so any radius to the beach should be as short as another.

No woodsman, Rufe realized that without a compass, his only hope was to find a route where he could keep the sun or stars in view overhead.

The sun was sinking lower now, so it *was* afternoon, going on evening. Several times, he heard rustles in the brush and caught the movement of little furry animals, about the size of a rabbit but chunky and tailless.

This reminded him of the gnawing hunger pains in his stomach that had been temporarily assuaged by the fruit. He felt the lack of a weapon more keenly now. How the devil were they supposed to survive with their bare hands?

It was this lack of tools, knives, matches, that gave

him a sense of urgency to seek out the civilization on the coast. To survive this long they must have developed some kind of primitive technology.

Several times he stopped to pick fruits of various colors and sizes. One in particular, the size of an orange, was very palatable. When he chewed off its tough husk, it fell apart in four sections, and the meat was a white, moist, nut-like consistency of delicate flavor.

He probed slowly for less dense entry, but there seemed to be none. Suddenly he came upon the same ground where he'd left the others. It was marked up with their footsteps, and purple fruit pulps were scattered around. He had completed the circle.

The men were nowhere to be seen.

He tracked their single-file path along the border of the field and found where they had cut out for the coast—why, at this particular point, he couldn't determine.

Then, as he stood quietly, he heard the faint sound of water flowing. Grudgingly, he gave someone in the group credit for sense. They had decided to follow a stream bed to the ocean.

Now the sky was turning

golden, as a fine roseate mist thickened overhead and caught the last glow of the sinking sun. Even as he debated whether to seek the water, the mist deepened into cloud density, and the darkness began to fall quickly.

He could smell the moisture, and before the light failed he could even see it condensing on the great, broadleafed foliage. No sense in stumbling around in that mess in the dark. He could pick up their trail easily enough in the morning. Judging from the brief afternoon, this planet had a short period of rotation. Morning wouldn't be too far off.

A spatter of rain caused him to move under the protection of the trees. Then the sky opened. He curled up at the bole of a plum tree and tried to sleep.

It was impossible. The torrent increased beyond tropical Earth intensity. The big leaves began spilling their loads down on Rufe like rain-spouts. He opened his mouth and drank his fill from one of the streams. A man wouldn't die of thirst, anyway.

Then the last trace of light faded, and it was black. He stirred uneasily, finally finding a place between streams

of falling water. But an occasional gust of wind would rattle the leaves and shower him. Time and time again, just as he was dozing off, he was thus awakened.

The night was a sleepless eternity. At last dawn filtered in, a dull, dirty gray, in which he could see scarcely fifty feet into the unabated rain. He leaned against the smooth trunk in a half-stupor of wakeful misery.

An over-ripe plum thumped and squashed beside him, but he was no longer hungry. He felt bloated and sodden as if he had spent the night at the bottom of a water-fall.

Then the gray became translucent with a tinge of yellow. The clattering rain diminished and halted, as a short-lived breeze blew away the remaining vapors. It was daylight.

Rufe lay exhausted in the peaceful silence and fell asleep at last.

He was awakened by voices. They were back!

He opened his eyes. The sun was high, now, almost overhead. Directly across the clearing the exiles were emitting from the jungle and staring about in obvious stupefaction.

Rufe grunted. They had

been up early, traveling. And they had repeated his error of the day before, on a grander scale, circling back to the plain.

Then his attention was distracted nearer at hand. Several chubby, ear-less, tail-less little animals were filling their round bellies with wind-fallen and rain-ruptured fruits. A single large nostril above the round, tubular mouth, seemed to be their chief guide to the edibles. Eyeslots revealed no visible eye-ball.

One snuffled up to the plum beside Rufe. He grabbed it by the long, thin fur of its back. Its stubby legs churned the air as he lifted it, and it woofed softly. He killed it with a swift chop of the side of his hand across the back where its neck should be somewhere under the fur.

He held it up with a strange feeling of pride, a trophy of sorts. Without thinking he yelled across the field, "Hey, look!"

The others had slumped down on the edge of the field and seemed little interested in his kill. He walked over to them, his sodden garments steaming in the bright sunlight.

They were a miserable lot. Marco sprawled on his belly

beside Len, both asleep already. Their loose, gray clothing was filthy with mud and slime.

Rufe counted them as he came up. Only thirteen. Four missing!

The only one who remained awake to greet him was the young man he had punched in the stomach yesterday. He raised up on a weary elbow and grinned feebly. "Hullo, Rufe. Didn't get a chance to thank you yesterday—"

"What the hell happened here?" Rufe demanded.

The kid ignored the question. "You saved my life. None of these dopes had the brains to help me." He stuck up his right hand. "My name is Hank. After last night I'd like to stick to you."

Rufe jammed the limp animal into Hank's hand instead of shaking it. "Okay, you're my assistant. Skin it and cook it for breakfast," he said sarcastically. "Now, what happened?"

Hank, who had pillowed his head on the soft carcass of Rufe's present, said, "We lost them in some sort of sink hole last night—just as it got black and started raining.

Rufe turned back to him. "I thought you were follow-

ing the water. How'd you show up back here?"

"We was doing fine until it got light. By then there was water running a dozen different ways from the rain, and when we got within seeing distance of any of it, the ground mucked up to our waists. Marco tried heading out in a straight line, and we wound up here."

He shook his head disgustingly. "We walked hours this morning, and all the time we were circling."

Rufe saw their mistake. They should have waited near the stream until the run-off from the rain subsided, then followed it as best they could, mud or no mud.

He debated whether to strike out. The sun's warmth felt good and he was still sleepy. He decided to take a nap himself. He stretched out on the edge of the shade, pulling a yard-long leaf from a bush as protection for his head.

It seemed he had barely fallen asleep when someone shook him awake. It was Hank. His eyes were still red-rimmed from fatigue, but they were wide open and excited.

"Rufe, Rufe, look what I have!"

The big man came awake

reluctantly. Then his eyes, too, grew larger. Hank held a small, shallow, leather box in his hand. In its center, balanced on a reddish thorn was a wobbling sliver of grayish stone.

In Hank's unsteady hand the sliver swung wildly from side to side, but unmistakably, it was a crude compass.

"She—she brought it to us—"

"She? Who is *she*?" Rufe asked incredulously.

"The girl. Young—and pretty as hell!"

"Where is she? Why didn't you wake me up? She must be from the coast!"

Hank nodded. "She wouldn't let me wake anybody until she left."

"Which way did she go?"

"She said not to track her or we'd get lost." He nodded at the compass. "Said to follow the pointer, and if any of us got through we would be accepted to the colony."

"If we get through? Hell, this will be simple!"

Hank shook his head. "She said it was only ten miles, but very few make it through each year. She wouldn't say why!"

Rufe was puzzled. If they were welcome to the colony,

why didn't she guide them back? If they weren't welcome, why had she brought the compass?

"It doesn't make sense," he said. "Do they want us or don't they?"

"She wouldn't answer many questions," Hank said. "She said that they could use a few more men in the colony because they were breeding more girls than boys. But they didn't want any brainless scum. If we don't have what it takes to get through on our own, they don't want us."

Rufe pondered. "What else did she say?"

"That's all—oh, except the lesson. She said there was a lesson in the jungle that any survivor would have to learn. She wouldn't say what it was."

"You damned fool, why didn't you wake us all up?" Rufe shouted at him. "We could have forced her to lead us out!"

Hank looked down at the ground for an embarrassed minute. "I guess—that's why she woke *me* up. I must have looked like—like I wouldn't do what she told me not to."

Even with the compass it was not as easy as Rufe had thought. When the gloom be-

gan to deepen they had penetrated less than a mile, he estimated, and they had been walking for many hours.

He had wanted to head out at once with just the kid, but Hank had insisted on waking everyone and telling the story over for their benefit. As it turned out, the other men were no hindrance. The compass swung so crazily that it was slow work taking the frequent bearings required by their zig-zag course.

Rufe went first breaking trail with Hank behind him several paces carrying the compass, directing him. The ground was uneven, spongy and piled with heavy, sodden vegetable debris, and their feet sank into it sometimes up to the knee. Every step was work, and even at their snail's pace they all breathed heavily.

At the first noticeable dimming of the murky light, Rufe stopped for the night. They were all so tired that nobody demurred.

He gathered an armful of the broadest leaves he could find and made a bed of sorts. The leaves were sticky and unpleasant to the touch, but they were tough enough to keep him from sinking into the moldy rot of the ground. He saved several of the larg-

est leaves for a cover, remembering the rain of last night.

The others mimicked him without comment. Hank bedded down beside Rufe, and the others clumped together nearby.

Hank asked, "How long will it take us, do you think, Rufe?"

The big man spit out pieces of husks from a nut-fruit he had picked for his supper. "If you could hold that compass steadier we could probably be out of this in a couple of days, but at this rate we'll be a week."

A spatter of rain crackled into the leaves high overhead. Marco said, "Here it comes again. God, do you think this happens every night?"

Len's high, worried voice rose over the pattering. "Hope we're not on low ground or we'll be afloat by morning."

They arranged the broad circles of leaves over themselves. Hank said, "I'd give ten bucks for a smoke right now."

Then the deluge roared down like the slapping of a thousand beaver-tails, and all conversation less than a shout became impossible.

Rufe watched from under the leaf protecting his head.

The dim shapes of the men faded quickly into the blackness, and once more he was alone with the night and the water and the noise of the torrents.

His eyes ached for sleep, but the hammering of the tepid spillage of the trees kept his tired muscles tense. He kept staring out into the incredible blackness, searching for he knew not what.

His nerves finally rebelled, and he fell into a stupor. He dreamed, and for the hundredth time, his nightmare reenacted the crime of which he'd been convicted.

He had warned Harry Kim to keep dope out of his gambling house, and the night Rufe had seen a sixteen-year-old girl emerging from the back room, weaving to the roulette tables, he knew Kim had ignored his warning.

He had slapped the girl in the face to make her mad enough to take care of herself, then he'd kicked in the door to Kim's little narcotics bar. The proprietor himself had come at Rufe carrying a stubby, fat little hypo for a weapon. Apparently Rufe had stomped him to a pulp.

He had awakened in a cell with a murder charge on his hands. The drug had been

quick-acting, and only vaguely did he remember going berserk.

The court had adjudged him sadistically unbalanced, incurable except by electropanning and psycho-synthesis. This was his reward for fifteen years of protecting a mewling, neurotic society from itself.

Vividly he recalled standing with a wrist manacled to an officer on either side of him. When the judge spoke the guilty verdict and pronounced the sentence his reaction had been violent. He relived the scene where he tried to tear loose, breaking the arms of both policemen, dragging them almost to the door before a squad swarmed him under.

Rufus Ingram, convicted sadist!

He writhed under the restraining straps back in his cell—then he awoke, muscles straining to rise.

He was held gently but firmly to the sodden mulch, lying in the indentation which his body had made. He was on his belly, head pillowed on his arms, and the great leaves were still in place. In the first faint light he could see that the leaves had sprouted hundreds of fine, white tendrils at their edges, and these ran

into the ground like Lilliputian sutures, making the leaves effective bonds.

Once understood, they were not so terrifying. He fought off the panic, relaxed his huge body and began stirring one part of his body at a time. His arms were useless, being numb asleep.

The rains had stopped, and except for the desultory dripping it was quiet. He worked one foot free by a series of short kicks that tore loose the fine anchorages, then he tried working his knee upward. It wouldn't go. Struggle as he might, he was firmly bound, all but the one foot.

"Hank!" he called. "Hank, wake up!"

He heard the stirring of the boy whose life he had saved. "Yeah! Huh? Hey, what the hell!" Hank began cursing insanely. His curses turned to screams, as he struggled vainly against his bindings.

Now the others were awake, and the air became full of hysterical shouts and wild rustlings.

Rufe waited for one of them to tear loose. Certainly not all of them would have remained covered the whole night—

He heaved against his own bonds, and suddenly sweat poured from him to mingle

with the natural wetness. The leaves were hugging in more tightly. He had less freedom than before. He could see that the edges of the leaf covering his head had drawn down more closely to the surface, so now less than an inch of pale light showed.

His arms were sinking deeper into the muck, and his chin was touching the stuff. He could feel the water fill up around his face. A man could drown—

The muffled screams of the others told him that no aid was likely from them. As the light increased the tightening grew more rapid. Now it was becoming more difficult to breathe.

Even as he watched the fine filaments seemed to draw substance from the soil and grow thicker. More tendrils were reaching down, and the lacing was strengthening and reinforcing itself with every minute.

Then he felt a kick, then another, lashing at his feet. Both feet came free. He jerked both knees up frog-like and the bonds began to give. They ripped loose reluctantly, stretching like rubber bands but snapping under enough stress.

In a moment he was free.

Marco shouted at him, "Hurry up, help me get the others loose."

Rufe staggered to his feet shaking his numb arms. They were still useless, but he glanced around and saw the necessity for haste. The green mounds were all around him, but several of them were drawn down almost flush with the surface. These were motionless.

He began kicking at the edges of Hank's green deathshroud. By the time Hank was free, Marco had two others loose, and they went about freeing the others.

The nightmare was over, but not without a toll. Four men, identified by Len as Ockie, Clark, Max and Savotti, were beyond help, drowned by the ground water that had filled the depressions of their captive bodies.

Several of the survivors were half insane. They continued their screams, and they stomped on the leaves in blind revenge until they sank to their knees with exhaustion.

No one tried to restrain or comfort them. The ten men finally huddled in a small knot, sitting on the leaves on which they had slept. These looked like giant staples with their ends turned down, and

their surfaces formed the only places where a man could sit without sinking in half a foot.

Marco said, "Hell of a cute idea you had, Rufe—using leaves to keep off the water."

Rufe ignored him. He was staring at his hands. They were wrinkled like an old man's from the tepid wetness. His face was loose, and the others looked like disinterred corpses. The vegetable rot had a sulfurous smell that gave him a sensation of filth.

Len said, "Another night like that and I'll be nuts. We better get going."

Rufe shook his head. "Impossible to make any time until this stuff drains a little bit." Marco agreed.

They sat, feet sunk almost to the knees, hunched over, heads on arms. In this position Rufe dozed and listened to the mutterings and complaints. He felt no remorse at the death of the four convicts. He hadn't told them to use the leaves for a cover.

Nor did he feel any particular gratitude toward Marco for freeing him. He would have done the same if he had broken loose first.

Or would he?

He was mixed up. Why, when Marco had freed him,

had he worked like a mad man to save the others from death? In payment for his life? No. Marco had saved his own life already. In anger toward the perverted nature of this stinking planet?

Probably not. The leaves were not attacking him—they were merely taking root, and to curse them was as sensible as cursing the clouds that dumped the rain on them.

Then why?

He looked at the bedraggled lot of them. He knew them by name, now. Jeemo, armed robbery—Hardy, kidnapping—Bennington and Crossyn, burglary—O'Brien, bootlegging dope and liquor—Shovak, robbery and criminal assault—Len, forgery—Hank and Marco, fraud. Habituals, all of them. On earth, they were all on the other side of the law, but now he bore their brand: Anti-social.

When he couldn't stomach the so-called polite society of his earth-fellows, how could he find it profitable to preserve the health of this scum?

Was it because they seemed to have accepted him as their leader? Hell, he wasn't leading! He was hiking to the coast, and they were following him, that's all. If they wanted to pick and eat the fruit he ate and follow in his

footsteps and cover themselves with leaves like he did—that was their business. If there was any blame for the death of the unfortunate four, it belonged to the girl who had brought the compass. She could have warned them, or better yet, she could have led them to safety and have saved four lives.

The shock of the entrapment was passing now, and the men began foraging for food. When they had eaten, the ground seemed firmer, so Rufe and Hank, the compass bearer, struck out. The others fell in behind.

They moved silently except for grunts and frequent curses. They seemed to be moving slightly downhill. The vegetation was thickening, and they began to encounter impenetrable thickets that required wide detours.

As he rounded one of these Rufe heard water flowing. A few paces ahead he came upon a relatively open stretch paved with sand that led down an easy grade to a wide, shallow creek.

The water was clear, and the light filtered down through less dense overhead foliage. The sandy bottom looked innocent enough, and Rufe was about to wade into

it when Hardy, who was third in line, shouted to him.

"Wait, before you stir it up let's have a drink." They were all hot from the exertion of the steamy trek, so Rufe swung aside and let the others come up. He was hungrier than he was thirsty, so he cast about for one of the trees that bore the gigantic, sweet nuts that tasted much like a cashew.

Hank was carefully putting down the compass before drinking, so Hardy was the first one on his belly beside the stream. His lips touched the water.

Rufe whirled at the bubbly scream. Hardy was on his feet now, blood gushing from a ragged notch in his lower lip where a chunk of flesh was bitten away. Hardy cursed and spattered blood out over the water. Then he began kicking at something in the water. He seemed to go mad, wading out, threshing at the surface with his fists. It was deeper than it looked. He went in to his hips, then his screams and contorted face disappeared as he doubled over and thrashed below the surface.

The water boiled with indistinct motion. Sand roiled up and blood stained it a darkening pink.

Hank yelled, "Something's got Hardy! For God's sake, somebody, do something!"

Coming up behind him Rufe jerked Hank back from the water's edge. "Don't be a fool. Look at that!"

He pointed up-stream where the water wasn't fouled yet. Slender, black creatures, a foot long, pushed their knoblike heads in the direction of the foundering Hardy. They moved with a whip-motion of their tapering tails, and their tiny teeth were visible before they entered the cloud of blood and bottom debris. There were hundreds of them converging on the spot, like overgrown polliwogs.

Like the predatory piranhas of earth's South American streams, the little freshwater savages stripped Hardy to a grinning skeleton in a matter of minutes.

Hank vomited, and Hovak stared fascinated, uttering over and over, "Jeeziz, jeeziz, jeeziz!"

Marco watched with a set jaw. When the water was quiet again, he looked over at Rufe who was still holding the nutmeat. "Lucky for you Hardy was thirsty."

Rufe had been reflecting upon this fact. If Hardy had not called out at the instant

he did, Rufe would have been hip-deep in flashing teeth before he could stop.

Twice in one day his life had been saved, once at the cost of another man's. Also, all the others were now complaining of diarrhea from the diet of raw fruits, yet he felt strong and fit.

"So we can't cross the creek?" Len said. He had been spared much of the horror of Hardy's death because of his weak eyes. "We can't just sit here."

Jeemo, a short, fat, swarthy fellow, snapped, "What's the matter? Can't you wait to get at the women?"

The dry incongruity of the remark struck several of the men funny. Hank swore at their laughter, so soon after the macabre slaughter of one of their number.

Rufe turned in disgust and lead off downstream, searching for a place to cross. The sand gave way to deep muck, and the going became difficult, but Rufe was afraid to stray too far from the water's edge in fear of losing it. The brook wandered carelessly in S-curves, and finally broke into a wide, flat, shallow at least forty feet across.

For the first time they

could see the sky. The sun was still high overhead, and the pool appeared to be only an inch or two deep.

Rufe said, "Let's try it here."

Hank was opposed, but Rufe refused to listen to him. He wrenched up some small eight-foot saplings, stripped off the immature leaves and advised the others to do likewise.

The footing here was sand again, but he didn't trust it. He edged into the water poking the pole before him. The pole seemed to hold on the bottom until he put most of his weight on it, then it broke through a crust and sank quickly.

His own feet, being broader, stayed on the surface near the edge.

Marco, watching for the little black fish, said, "No sign of the little bastards. Here, Rufe, let me go first this time."

Rufe didn't like the feel of the surface beneath him, and while he hesitated, Marco pushed by him prodding ahead for soft spots. The others waited tensely, while he minced his way across. Several times he began to sink, but he moved quickly before his feet were trapped.

He turned at the far shore and called back, "Nothing to it. Just keep moving. You start sinking if you stop in one spot."

Rufe eyed the creek-bed doubtfully. He was at least fifty pounds heavier than Marco, although the rest of the men were all lighter. They crowded around him.

He waved them on. "Go ahead. If Marco made it, you can."

They all crossed safely, clutching their poles and prodding suspiciously.

Hank was last across, then he turned and waited for Rufe to try it. The swift rotation of the planet was already throwing shadows of the surrounding trees across the lower end of the shallows. Rufe stepped downstream to look into the deeper water, but the drifting sediment from the other's feet obscured his view.

Returning to the ford he edged out into the dimpled, shallow water, three short, shuffling steps, four, five. He thought he had the hang of it. Ease your weight onto the front foot, but pick up the back foot quickly before it sinks.

He was just past the middle, some seven yards from the far bank, when his left

foot broke through the treacherous crust. He was hair-triggered for such a possibility and instantly threw himself forward to sprawl at full length in two inches of water.

Marco guffawed, "Swim for it, Red, the sharks are coming!"

Rufe was wasting no time. He extricated his left foot and began a frog-like kicking and hauled himself along with the flats of his arms, but it was slow progress.

He felt ridiculous looking into the grins of the other men. For once his great physique worked against him, and all but Hank were enjoying his humble method of locomotion.

Hank was keeping a watchful lookout down-stream. Suddenly he shouted, "They *are* coming—the fish, Rufe. For God's sake, hurry!"

The shock of the shout brought the big man to his hands and knees, and the four, smaller points of support broke through the crust. He spent precious seconds rolling his limbs free while Hank moved out with his pole and began thrashing the water below him.

Now Marco grabbed up his pole and the others did like-

wise. Rufe was only ten feet from shore now, but his hurried actions made him keep breaking through the crust, and his progress was nightmarishly slow.

Sharp pain stabbed his right ankle, and even as he kicked and felt resistance to his foot, he saw a little ominous mound of water slip up near the bank, under the men's sticks and head for his throat.

He swung his right fist and back-handed the vicious little beast with a frantic blow, but in doing so he put too much pressure on his left elbow. His whole shoulder broke through, and his head went under briefly.

The water on the upstream side was piling up and digging the crust loose under his whole length. Blinded by the fine silt of the agitated water, Rufe struggled free and inched forward once more.

The yells to his right rang with a rising pitch of excitement that told him the little black monsters were threatening more heavily. Then a shrill scream and a sloshing thump sounded like someone had broken through the crust and sunk heavily into the underlying bed of soup. Twice, one of the sticks cracked his scrambling body, indicating

how near him the men were fighting off the darting flesh-eaters.

His hands touched dry land, and a strong arm heaved him clear of the melee.

He sank to the spongy turf trying to squeeze the muddy film from his eyes. The racket of the violent splashing and cursing stopped, but now he could hear several men crying and laughing hysterically, and there was an undertone of revulsion from others. Someone kept saying, "God-damit, goddamit!" the way a man will when he feels like crying and can't.

It penetrated to Rufe and reminded him of the sound of the breakthrough.

"Who'd we lose?" he grunted.

There was no answer. He forced his eyes apart and through the bleary film he saw six men standing some ten feet away down on the bank staring into a dark hole in the shallow water.

Six, and there should have been eight!

He lurched over to them, but he couldn't make out their faces yet. "Who went down?" he demanded.

A squat, broad outline turned to him, and Marco's voice said, "Hank and Len. A

hunk of crust broke and they went down together."

Shovak said, "Hank got ahold of my pole, but he let go. The little bastards—got him. They poured into that hole like it was a magnet."

Hank, the kid whose life Rufe had saved, punching him in the stomach, more out of irritation at Marco than from any other motive—Hank, had paid him back, given his life as live bait. And Len! What did the lanky, half-blind forger owe him? Why had he plunged out there with Hank?

And the others? All of them could have stayed safely on the bank and watched Rufe become fish food, but they didn't. They had risked their lives to save his—and succeeded.

Sandy-haired Bennington, the burglar, spoke up in his clipped, British accent. "Well, say something, man! This whole bloody party was on your behalf. We've saved you and lost Hank and Leonard. A bit of a damned poor bargain if you ask me!"

Marco cut him off. "Shut up! Rufe didn't ask for help."

Shovak snarled, "He'd of been bare to his stinking marrow if he hadn't got it!"

"I said *shut up*," Marco

shouted. "Don't you think he knows it?"

The bootlegger, O'Brien said grimly, "I doubt it. A cop wears his brains in his butt—which he can't find with both hands."

Through blurry lids Rufe saw Marco throw an open-hand slap that sent O'Brien back three paces, rubbing the side of his head. "Now get this," Marco said to all of them, "Rufe didn't invite any of us along. If you're all so proud of your guts and brains, why've you been tagging behind him?"

Astounded at Marco's defense Rufe suddenly realized that the reason was probably the stream of tears that were pouring from his tortured eyes, and which Marco had misinterpreted.

Bennington said, "That's easy to answer, man. The red-head has commanded the compass. Hank paired off with him and we had to follow."

Rufe said, "The compass! Where is it?"

There was silence for a long moment. No one knew. A frantic search finally turned up the leather cup that formed the case, but it had been stomped into the muck, and an hour of filtering the

filth through their fingers failed to turn up the missing sliver of lodestone that formed the pointer.

Rufe had spent the time cautiously dipping water and splashing it into his burning eyes, but when Marco came over to tell him that the compass pointer was still missing, his vision was still badly blurred.

"It's hopeless," Marco told him. "You could lose a watermelon in that mud."

Bennington came over. "And Hank isn't here to whistle up another beautiful doll, for us, so what is your suggestion for our itinerary now, Lord Masterbrain!"

The sarcasm and needling was beginning to prick his temper, but Rufe held his voice flat. He addressed Marco. "We'll have to try following the stream, that's all."

Marco spat at Bennington's feet. "That's what I figured. Any of you guys got a better idea?"

No one did. Rufe got off his knees and automatically moved out in front of the little band. Before he'd gone twenty feet he almost stumbled into one of the quick bends of the creek.

Marco helped pull him out

of the mud. "Your eyes still fouled up?"

Rufe rubbed them hard, but it only made them burn more. "Looks like," he admitted reluctantly. "I guess you'll have to march point for the patrol, Marco."

"Just a damned second!" said Shovak coming up. "We'll take turns at it. I'll take her for the rest of the day." The profane little robber pushed out ahead and began fighting his way through the heavier thickets that tended to border the stream.

Marco shrugged. "Good enough."

Bennington said, "Indeed! Let's all have a crack at the tin medal."

Rufe plodded along, third in line behind Marco. The Englishman behind him kept up a running patter of bitter comment, mostly barbed with resentment and aimed at Rufe.

Strange, but with his eyesight impaired, all sounds and conversations struck through with attention-clamoring impact. His sudden dependence on the others drove Rufe into a deeper and more sullen silence, but he found his temper mounting as, for the first time, he paid attention to all the conversation that muttered up and down the line.

The six remaining convicts began to emerge as individuals with remarkably little in common except the desire to gain the coast and "civilization."

Even Crossyn and Bennington who shared the profession of burglary turned out to be of different specialties. Crossyn had specialized in strictly cash jobs, banks and vaults, while Bennington was, by his statement, the most notorious jewel thief on the continent.

Rufe, in spite of his years in police work, had heard of neither of them.

All were products of the asphalt jungles of earth's metropolitan centers, and each had preyed on civilization even as Rufe had in turn sought them out to destroy them.

He wondered what kind of a lawless, cut-throat culture they would find when they did reach the coast. 250 years of dumping semi-annual, alternate cargoes of male and female malcontents to live and breed and struggle with an alien nature—would have resulted in what?

A surplus of women.

That was all they knew, these refugees. A culture with a surplus of women lived on the coast, and probably only

on the coast. It was unthinkable that they could endure the dreary, humid gloom of the jungle.

What depraved customs and morals would have grown out of twelve or fifteen generations of criminals, refreshed with small but frequent injections of lawlessness and the brutal selfishness of anarchy?

To what depths of bestiality would these men and women have sunk when forced to live isolated together, these people who, on earth, had said to society, "To hell with you and your communal ways! *I am enough.*"

And the ex-policeman wondered what would happen to him, who had embraced the same philosophy while taking his pay for fighting the ones holding his own convictions.

Yes, he admitted it now. Even this handful of convicts who moved with him, had his basic stripe of rebellion against constituted authority, the foppish so-called humanities, the puerile Christian doctrines — "thy-brother's-keeper" nonsense to which earth's multitudes paid lip-service on Sunday and spat at on Monday.

On the beach it would be kill or be killed, the only le-

gitimate law of the animal kingdom—the law of survival. Rufe felt no fear for himself. It would be his element.

They trudged on for hours, and Rufe was the first to sense the dimming of the gloom that preceded night.

Without thinking he yelled for a halt. "We'd better rig up some protection before it gets dark," he told them. The men seemed glad to break off the march. Without the compass they had moved more rapidly. With the knowledge that following the wildly meandering stream would make their journey much longer, they had plunged ahead faster, and even Rufe's powerful leg muscles were heavy with fatigue.

Bennington said, "I've got an idea. Let's just cover ourselves with leaves, nice big leaves that tuck themselves in all by themselves."

Marco ignored the sarcasm and sniffed the air. "It's getting soggy, all right. This rain must be a nightly business."

Rufe moved into the brush and began pulling up some saplings. His great arms wrenched them free from the loose, wet ground, and he piled them on a little rise. Under his direction they erected a long lean-to which

they covered with broad leaves.

Even Bennington turned to willingly when he caught the idea. They paved the floor with the leaves, as well, and Rufe sank down under the shelter, grateful at the prospect of a genuine sleep.

The light was going fast when Marco and Crossyn joined the others. They dumped two armloads of a long, melon-type fruit on the leaf floor.

Marco said, "I hope they're eatable. We seem to have run out of the plum and nut growths, and these are a nuisance to pick."

"Yeah, I had to stand on Marco's shoulders," Crossyn said. "They grow on those big trees over there, the ones with the limbs starting about twelve feet up, and the stems are so tough you can't knock them out with a stick."

Jeemo said, "Why didn't you climb the tree?"

Marco held his hands outside the shelter to catch the last light. His palms were dark with blood. "I tried that. It's worse than shark's skin. The little stickers always come loose."

The split the fruit, pounding one on the other. It was less juicy than the big plums,

but the fibers were soft, short and chewable.

They nibbled at the bland-tasting pulp. All had eaten some when O'Brien remarked, "Smells a little like mushrooms."

"Or toadstools," Jeemo suggested.

Bennington said, "We'll know in the morning when we count the corpses."

Marco grunted, "Next time climb your own tree, you royal sonofabitch."

The sprinkle of rain grew to a full clatter, cutting off further easy conversation. Rufe threw away the fruit that had grown nauseous to him and stretched out comfortably. The shelter was loosely built and dripped badly, but that was nothing to the heavy spillage that sloped from the high leaves when the night breeze stirred them.

Marco lay down beside Rufe and shouted in his ear, "Neat idea, Rufe. We'll get some sleep for a change."

But it wasn't to be. Rufe was scarcely asleep when Marco, on his right and Crossyn to his left, both began stirring about restlessly. Then Crossyn began jerking, bringing Rufe wide awake.

For a moment he feared

the man was struggling with an animal, so violent were his actions. Running his big hands over the convict's doubled-up form, he decided he was sick, and even as he made the discovery Crosssyn went into such violent convulsions that he began kicking loose the anchorage of the lean-to.

Rufe hauled him out into the rain, dumped him and resumed his slimy bed. Then Marco kicked him. He was about to rid himself of Marco when a wave of nausea clawed at his own belly.

It was swift and vicious. He lunged half out of the shelter and vomited, then he lay retching, oblivious of the beating rain gouts.

The "toadstool" fruit, he decided.

Dimly he was conscious of the shelter falling down over the backs of his legs, and movements of the ridgepole as others stirred about, but he could hear nothing.

This night was the worst yet. After hours of wrenching, dry heaves, the pain abated enough for him to think. He arose weakly and lifted the lean-to with its deadly leaves away from anyone who might still be under it. He threw it aside and sank down to endure another night

of Chinese drip torture, his eyes burning, his bitten ankle aching and his stomach forcing up wracking belches of gas every few minutes.

He was weak but still able to move when the light revealed the six sprawled bodies.

Crosssyn was dead.

Except Marco, the others were unable to get to their feet until the rain was gone and the full light of day filtered down into the murk. Marco was wobbly, but while they waited for the others to recover, he and Rufe hunted for food. There was none but the poisonous melon.

They returned to the others. Shovak, O'Brien and Jeemo were sitting up, now, but Bennington was still crouched in a foetal position, breathing heavily.

"We've got to move on," Marco said. "No food here."

Bennington's lips peeled back from his teeth. "Serve us some more toadstool melons. They should be delicious with the dew on them, old boy."

He made no effort to move while the others got to their feet. Marco stared at him for a minute, then he leaned over and pulled the Englishman to his feet.

Rufe watched curiously as the pale-faced thug tried to get a comfortable grip on Bennington. "Leave him," Rufe said coldly. "We've got enough troubles."

Marco said, "He'll be all right in a little while." He got the loose, uncooperative body across his back and began moving downstream in lead position.

Forgetting that his burden stuck out to left and right of him, he blundered between trees without enough clearance several times before Rufe stopped him.

"Let me take him. You'll beat his damned head off that way. You take point and I'll lug the bastard."

Without awaiting Marco's consent, he peeled Bennington off his broad back and hoisted him up in a comfortable fireman's carry over his own shoulder. "Now get going. My stomach is empty."

Marco turned and grinned at him. "Sure, copper. I think I see a ham-and-egg tree up ahead."

But it was almost dusk again before Jeemo spotted a plum tree. They had made slow time, stopping to rest frequently. Rufe had urged them on in spite of his aching shoulders, but Marco deliberately held down the pace.

Rufe let Bennington slip to the ground, and the five of them moved toward the tree. Several of the little furry animals woofed around its base. There had been no windfalls, or else they had been consumed by the snout-nosed vegetarians.

Jeemo cursed. "The little hogs ate up all the fruit on the ground, and look at them limbs. Twelve feet if it's a inch." He picked up a clod of debris and threw it at the nearest fur-ball.

The animal darted under the tree and disappeared into a mound of the little flat, slick, gray scales that covered the ground. The tree appeared to be shedding from its limbs and trunk.

"Must have a burrow under there," Jeemo said walking toward the mound. He didn't reach it. His feet slipped forward and down, and he sank out of sight in a cloud of the feather-light scales. He didn't finish his yell of, "Hey, for the love of—"

Rufe, who had been only a pace behind Jeemo, felt the skin of his face tighten with senseless rage. Another damned booby trap!

He moved swiftly to a clump of saplings, tore one loose and jammed it down

where Jeemo had disappeared. Four feet under he hit something. The pole wiggled, and the mound heaved, but Jeemo didn't take hold of the pole.

"Grab my legs, and when I kick, pull us out," Rufe shouted at Marco.

He slid over the edge of the invisible pit, took a deep breath, and as two men seized his heels, ducked below the surface. The stuff was light and slippery, and his arms plunged easily through it. They let him down further, and finally he felt a flailing arm beat feebly against his hand. Seconds passed before he made contact again. Jeemo's head—his long, thick hair. Rufe grabbed a handful and kicked. His lungs were aching, and he kicked too hard. Whoever was holding his left foot lost his grip, regained it, and he felt the tug on both legs.

Semi-solid ground pressed to his belly, and braced his free arm and helped haul Jeemo to the surface. His own head came free, and he exploded a cloud of the scales from his itching nostrils.

Jeemo came clear looking like a silver-fish. The stuff was jammed in his nose and mouth. Rufe picked him up by his limp middle and told

Marco to beat on his back. O'Brien, meanwhile, dug around in Jeemo's mouth. It was no use.

The Irishman said at length, "His throat is socked full of it."

"Hold him up!" Rufe leaned the unconscious man against Marco and hit him hard just below the diaphragm, the way he had saved Hank when he was strangling.

A few flakes puffed out, but Jeemo failed to inhale. "Don't you be beatin' on the dead boy, now," O'Brien said sharply. Marco's face was a contorted mask as he let the body slip from his arms.

"His feet! Look at his feet!"

Rufe stared down in the dwindling light and saw for the first time Jeemo's mangled ankles and feet. The toes were gone from one foot, the sandal sheared clean off below the instep. A ten-inch slice from heel to lower calf showed where a sharp, giant pincer had cleft his leg.

Shovak poked at the edge of the pit, exploring its outline and shape. It proved to be a funnel six feet in diameter at the top, with a steep taper. He jammed the pole some ten feet deep before he

hit bottom. It crackled and whipped in his hand, almost pulling him in. When he withdrew it, it was a foot shorter, hacked off at a clean angle.

"Like a damned doodlebug," he swore, jamming the pole down hard and letting it stay there. "We had little bitty ones in Corpus Christi. Ant-lions, they called them. Dug a pit and waited for ants to slip into them. At least they weren't covered up like this, though, ya dirty, stinkin'—"

Rufe stared down at the mutilated feet. The blood no longer spurted out. "What'll we do with him?"

Marco said, "Let's leave him in front of this pit. Maybe it will warn others."

Rufe frowned. Others! Others! Always Marco was worrying about others! Impatiently he tore up another sapling and beat some fruit from the tree.

It was small-seeded, and the fibers were a tough gelatin from which they could suck no juice without danger of strangling. Green fruit!

They built another shelter against the rain, hauled the limp, hollow-eyed Bennington under it and lay down weak with exhaustion and hunger. When the rain came, they stuck their heads out and

drank from the random down-spouts of spillage. The water was acrid from washing over the leaves, but it relieved some of the pain in their sore stomachs.

Bennington wouldn't drink. He died during the night.

Marco had to lead again. O'Brien and Shovak were barely able to stay on their feet, and Rufe's eyes were swollen almost shut, irritation of the inner lids kept them flooded with a blur of tears that made it difficult for him to keep a lookout for the increasingly frequent mounds of slick scales that marked the deadly pits.

As the plum trees increased in number so did the little animals, but there were no ripe windfalls for that reason. The fruit in the high limbs was all green and inedible.

Before the day was half over Shovak collapsed from fatigue. O'Brien dropped beside him and admitted, "I'm done for, too, if I don't get something to eat real quick."

Rufe called Marco back. "I'm going to kill some game," he announced. "Come along and keep me out of the pits, will you?"

Marco nodded. He was still on his feet, but he was too weak to uproot a sapling.

Rufe fashioned a long club, and the two men went hunting.

Rufe made his first kill almost at once. They found the animal plump and heavy. Seizing the tender belly skin the big man ripped it open with his fingernails.

"The blood," Marco said. "Drink the blood."

They tore at the carcass greedily with their teeth. Even raw, meat was tender, and the heavy layer of fat was sweet. "Why didn't we think of this before?" Rufe said between bloody mouthfuls.

Marco grinned gruesomely. "Too civilized. You realize, this makes us first class savages."

Rufe nodded, and for the first time he felt like smiling. "That must be the lesson we were supposed to learn. Remember? The girl who gave Hank the compass? She said we had to come through the hard way and learn a lesson."

He tore a rear haunch loose and chewed at the yellow fat of the thigh. "She meant that they didn't want us bringing any table manners to camp."

Marco combed the bright thin blood from his inch-long beard. "Well, we're down rootin' with the hogs, all right, if that's what they

want. How much farther do you think we have to go, Rufe?"

"No idea. This creek must have half-circled the island. I feel like we've walked a hundred miles and half of it backwards."

He lurched to his feet grabbing the club. "There's another delicious little sweetheart." He leaped after it.

"Look out!" Marco screamed at him. Rufe pulled up sharp, blinked his eyes and found himself staring at a slick mound. Another step and he would have plunged into it.

He turned to say something, but a fur-ball pattered within reach of his club, and he took after it.

They brought the second animal back to Shovak and O'Brien. Rufe had to tear it open for them, but they needed no coaxing to eat it.

When they were gorged O'Brien finally patted his belly and spoke. "When you first came out of the bush and I looked at yer bloody faces I thought for a minute you two had been havin' a personal disagreement."

The two weakened men tried manfully to continue the march, but before they had gone a hundred paces their

shrunk stomachs rebelled at the unusual fare and they both vomited the meat they had eaten.

Rufe took Marco aside. "These boys aren't going to make it if they don't eat, and meat's too strong for them. You scout ahead a way and try to turn up something. I'll stay here and make a shelter."

Marco looked at the narrow slits between the purple puffs of flesh that were Rufe's eyes. "Will do, but don't fall in the creek while I'm gone."

"Take care of yourself," Rufe found himself saying. He stepped off quickly to gather materials for the shelter, rubbing his eyes constantly to see at all.

By the time the shelter was complete Shovak and O'Brien were asleep under it. He looked down at the pale, filthy faces, streaked with grime and dried blood and wondered numbly why he hadn't gone on with Marco.

The following morning he wished he had. His eyes were swollen tightly shut from the brutal rubbing he had given them.

Marco had not returned.

He called out to O'Brien and Shovak, but neither answered him. He felt around and found them, still under

the dripping shelter. Shovak was dead. O'Brien's breathing was so shallow he had to listen over a minute before he could detect it. He shook the Irishman and slapped his face, but he couldn't rouse him.

Slowly his mind grasped the fact that he was alone with a dying man and a corpse. Alone and blind and hungry. But the crushing thought was that Marco was dead. He was sure of it. The cocky, barrel-chested little man would never have deserted them if he still lived. Of that, Rufe was certain. Even if he had found no fruit for O'Brien, Marco would have returned to help lead them on—if he lived.

Gingerly he pried open the swollen flesh of his eyelids. He found a soft, green stem from a leaf, bit off two sections an inch long, blunted the ends with his fingernails and propped his eyes open. The stems poked into the tender flesh painfully, but he needed the use of his hands.

He fumbled around in a thicket for a sapling, found several the right size, but was unable to uproot them. He chose a smaller one and made a club.

A half hour later he gave

up. No little animals appeared. He came back to the lean-to still clutching the club. He looked down at O'Brien. He'd be doing the man a favor to bash his head in rather than leave him to die, God knew how slowly.

He turned away downstream and searched for Marco's tracks. He found a few water-filled footprints but lost the trail within a few paces. He back-tracked to pick it up again, then he stopped.

Still within sight of the shelter, he saw O'Brien move a hand feebly—or was it the distortion of the tears in his own seared eyes?

He stared down at one of Marco's deep tracks. A man's feet would sink deeper than that with him if he were fool enough to carry someone on his back—yet, Marco had insisted on packing Bennington.

Why had he done it? The Englishman had been done for, and they all knew it. Why, then? There must be an answer! He threw away the club, tore aside the lean-to and looked down at the motionless Irishman.

He loaded O'Brien on his back and set off down the stream. It was still early, and the ground was so soft he

often sank to his knees from the additional weight, but he kept on, one labored step after another.

No longer could he see the creek, but luckily it held a straight course as the terrain seemed to drop a little more steeply, and he kept the sound of the water in his right ear.

Twice he stopped to try to make a kill, but the little animals escaped his clumsy, mud laden motions. He resumed his burden and plodded on.

Once he shifted his load and noted with annoyance that it seemed cold and stiff. Why was he carrying this? He could no longer remember. He knew only that he must keep walking, one plunging, sucking step after another. Keep moving!

Then it was easier. He wondered why. The load was gone! O'Brien was off his shoulder and had him by the hand leading him. About god-dam time! He'd ridden half the day. And he was talking. Only he was talking with Marco's voice.

Marco had returned!

No, now it sounded like a woman's voice. He could no longer see. The stems were gone from his eyes, and they were shut again. But a steady hand at his elbow guided him.

Bright light flared redly

through his closed lids. More words. Mixed voices. Sharp, glaring light.

"He'll make it. We won't need a stretcher. Less than a half mile now. There's the clearing and the cliff down there."

"I think he'd have made it by himself, but he'd probably have fallen down the cliff and beat his fool brains out, blind like that."

It was Marco's voice, Rufe was sure now.

"Marco," he said hoarsely.

No answer.

"Marco!"

"Yeah, fellow?"

"Where the hell were you? Last night? I thought—"

"Take it easy, boy. Things are really lush here. It's all over! We made it, and you're really going to like it here!"

"Where the hell were you?" Rufe insisted bitterly, and the tears that ran down his cheeks were real and resentful.

"They wouldn't let me come back. It was dark and raining before I convinced them," Marco explained.

"Of what?"

"That—that you were worth going back after. They

got a silly damned tradition here. Every con has to make it through under his own power—the whole way. Something to do with the lesson we were talking about."

A brusque, female voice said, "Don't confuse him. We'll explain later."

Rufe shook his head stiffly. "You got it wrong, Marco. That's not—the lesson. That's just the way you learn it."

"That's not it?"

"No."

The woman's voice was low, carefully modulated, almost cultured. She said, "Go on, Mr. Ingram. What was the lesson?"

Rufe frowned, trying to find words in his fevered brain. He stumbled over an unevenness, but Marco's hand steadied him and kept him from falling.

"That's it," he said thickly. "That's the lesson, Marco! No man—no man walks far—alone." There was silence for a dozen paces, then the woman reached out and took his other arm.

"He'll do," she said, softly. "He'll do just fine."

THE END

NO STAR IS SAFE

BY P. F. COSTELLO

Spender thought Denton was up to something and he was right. Nothing very important, though. Just a little plan to blow the Solar system out of the universe.

THE girl without any clothes on came out of the wall again. This was the fourth time in three days. Spender Kelly opened his blood shot eyes and told her to go away. She smiled and shrugged and obeyed. Then the turbaned eunuch peeked mischievously down through the chicken-wire netting that served as a ceiling for the stinking four-foot cubicle that masqueraded as a room. Spender snarled at him. The snarl was enough. The eunuch vanished in a spasm of fright.

Spender closed his eyes, then opened them again to look at the bottle on the stand beside the bed. It was empty. He scowled at it and pulled himself to a sitting position. It hadn't been bad stuff, really; not bad for a man who

cared nothing about his stomach or his sanity, and neither item concerned Spender. The bottle-store clerk had said it was brewed on Mars and that the wholesaler had called it fluke water. He had touted it as a gentle poison in that it was unique in its delirium tremens effects. it didn't stave off the DTs, but it made them interesting; no purple elephants wearing green swimming suits; no creeps or monsters; only the beautiful things that lurk in everyone's subconscious and need only to be conjured up. Great stuff for anyone who wanted to forget his past the easy way. None of this had interested Spender particularly. Only the price had fascinated him. The fluke water was the cheapest booze in the place,



This girl was no phantom. She was flesh and blood.

and a little bit went a long way. His bottle had lasted four days, but now it was gone and so was Spender's money.

But the effect was evidently still upon him because, when he turned his head, he saw another beautiful girl standing by the bed. More beautiful, than the one he'd just shooed back into the wall. But not as naked. In fact this one was completely dressed; a startling red head wearing the latest ensemble on the space travel *motif*; clinging, practical, expensive.

Spender rubbed a hand over his week-old growth of beard and said, "Go away, honey. Fade out. Evaporate. Dressed or stripped, you still don't interest me."

But this one refused to obey. She remained where she was and kept her beautiful green eyes on Spender. She wore an expression of both contempt and concern, mixed to a degree that made it impossible to tell which emotion dominated. When she spoke, her words were biting. "I suppose that means women follow you even into this cess-pool."

"Insult noted," Spender said. "Sorry I said what I did. Case of mistaken identity. Now please go away.

After you lend me ten dollars, that is."

"For more booze, I suppose."

"What else? And to prove I don't intend to waste it on anything silly, you can go out and buy the bottle yourself."

The girl's expression now changed to one of pity, and there was bewilderment in the quick gesture of her lovely hand. "Spender—why? In God's name—just tell me that! *Why*? Then I'll go away and let you alone if you tell me to. But I've got to know."

Spender Kelly turned with weary exasperation. "Cassie, you're a good kid. I like you. I'll go further than that and say you'd be the one for me if things were different. But they aren't. Things are—are the way—oh, hell! Just drop ten bucks on the table and get out of here."

She tried again. "Spender, please listen to me. It's not too late. No matter *what's* happened to you—it isn't too late. Let me prove it. I got a present from my uncle since I saw you last. The most beautiful little space boat you ever laid eyes on. A Chalmers; a ten-ton pleasure cruiser."

Spender did not bother to reply.

"We'll go out and set an orbit, Spender. Just the two of us, and you can rest and get yourself straightened out. Please, Spender."

"Honey—I ask only one thing. Get your pretty little nose out of my business and stay the hell away from me. Is that too subtle, or am I making my wishes clear?"

The girl's lovely face blazed with color. Contempt brightened her eyes. "All right, you—you pig! Go ahead and wallow in your filth and see if I care. Go ahead and—" She stopped and her smile was icy. Then she said, "In fact I'll help you. All you want is bottle poison so I'll get you one. I'll help you into hell with my blessing." She stepped to the stand and picked up the empty bottle. "Is this your favorite brand of slop?"

"Hell no. As long as you're buying, make it something good."

She put the bottle under her arm and her voice was a sob. "Very well. I'll accommodate you!"

"That's my baby," Spender muttered fervently, and lay back on the dirty cot. "Cassie Marno—girl scout. A drunk's best pal."

With the mist of liquor drifting out of Spender's brain, his mind went, as

usual, back into the past—back to the memory he had striven, through whiskey, to avoid. He was again on the ship in deep space. Again the lethal rays seared out and fried the men who had been his friends and did not deserve to die.

Then a sound opened Spender's eyes and there was someone else in the room. But not Cassie Marno. A man this time; a prim, disapproving man with a briefcase under his arm. "Who the hell are you?" Spender growled. "And what do you want?"

"My name is Arthur Freeman, and I've probably made a mistake."

"Then why hang around?"

"Let's make sure I'm mistaken, first. I'm looking for a man named Spender Kelly."

"I'm Spender Kelly. But you've still made a mistake."

"I represent the Tri-Star Detective Agency."

"I never heard of them."

"If you're the Spender Kelly I'm looking for, you most certainly have."

"Look—all I want is to be left alone—"

"Two years ago," Arthur Freeman went on, firmly, "a Mr. Spender Kelly came to our agency and hired us to locate an individual named Ramsey Denton."

Spender's eyes opened sharply. They focused on the man as Spender came slowly to a sitting position. "Go on," he said.

"Then you remember?"

"I remember."

Freeman looked about him, "There appears to have been some changes since—"

"Never mind the personal observations. I supposed you people had failed long ago."

"You paid us a great deal of money," Freeman said, stiffly, "and we are a reliable agency. We were placed in the awkward position, however, of having to relocate our client after gathering the information he requested."

"Get to it, will you?"

"Very well. We learned that a man named Ramsey Denton appeared before a secondary branch of the Interplanetary Security Board in Stockholm, Sweden and was cleared of criminal suspicion hinging around the loss of the Queen Bee, a space ship. The investigation took place about eight months ago."

"The clever bastard!" Spender muttered. "He framed a clearance some way and now he can never be touched on the charge again."

"That's quite correct. We traced the man from that

point and have spent the intervening time in trying to report to you."

"You lost him again?" Spender asked sharply.

"Indeed not. Denton has been very active in the meantime but we kept track of him. He obtained backing for some space venture and is now hiring labor for work on a satellite."

"What satellite?"

"It is designated as V5 in the Leo sector."

"What kind of work?"

"Labor—skilled and unskilled. We haven't been able to learn much about the project itself, but it appears to involve construction of some sort."

"Where is Denton hiring this labor?"

"Not Denton. He has changed his name to Arthur Wentworth. He is basing his operations in St. Louis—near the Mississippi Space Port. He calls it Wentworth Enterprises."

Spender Kelly's eyes had brightened. A perceptible vitality had returned to him. He sat on the edge of the bed, his hands gripped together, his eyes fixed on Freeman with intense concentration. "You've done a good job," he said.

"Thank you," Freeman

said, primly. "It has been entirely satisfactory?"

"Entirely."

"Then you will have no objection to signing this receipt?"

"None whatever."

"Freeman took a sheet of paper from his briefcase, laid it on the stand, and handed Spender a pen. Spender signed the paper. Freeman folded it and put it back in the briefcase with obvious satisfaction. "That concludes our business," he said. "If you ever have further need of our services, please call on us."

Spender grinned. "I'll even recommend you to my friends."

Freeman took up his briefcase and left.

Freeman was hardly out the door before Spender Kelly was digging under his cot. He brought out a cheap suitcase held together by a length of cord tied around the middle. A change had come over him now, and he worked with grim decision. He broke the cord around the suitcase and took out a change of clothing and a jar of shaving cream. Acting as though he had ten minutes to catch a train, he smeared the cream on his beard with **savage** fin-

gers. Then he scarcely gave its chemicals time to work before he jerked the sheet from the cot and wiped away his week-old growth of beard.

A small cracked mirror showed his face to be somewhat pale but still more deeply tanned than that of the average planetbound citizen.

He was fastening his black tunic when the door again opened. Cassie Marno stood there.

She carried a package under one arm and stood frozen with astonishment. "What—what on earth?"

"What's wrong with you?" Spender growled.

"Wrong with *me*? Good heavens! That's my question. What happened to you?"

"I changed my clothes. Is that such a surprise?"

"Why—why under the circumstances, I'd say, yes."

"Something came up. You said you had a new space boat!"

Cassie was still thunderstruck. "Yes—I have."

"Want to take a ride?"

Her eyes brightened hopefully. "You mean—what I said about—?"

"Not exactly." Spender's eyes moved to the package Cassie was carrying. "What have you got there?"

"A fresh bottle. Fifteen

minutes ago it was all you wanted out of life."

Spender grinned, but there was a softness in his expression. "Cassie, you're a champion!" He took two steps and lifted the bottle from her hands and dropped it on the bed. He put his own hands on her shoulders and looked down into her eyes. "Why have you done it, Cassie?"

Her eyes dropped from his. "Well, it was all you wanted—all I could do for you—"

"I don't mean that. I mean all these months—these last two years. Following me around. Haunting me. Trying to straighten me out." There was a moment of silence while he crooked a finger under her chin and lifted her head. "How many times in the last two years have I insulted you, Cassie—chased you away?"

"Pretty often."

"And you always came back. Why?"

The girl's expression said it was a silly question; that any fool should know why. "Because I love you."

He studied her face for a long moment. "I've always thought of you as a kid, Cassie. I remember—you were there first time I walked into your father's office to sign on for the *Queen Bee* run. You were sitting on the

corner of his desk. You looked about fourteen."

"I was nineteen and you paid me no attention whatever. That other man was with you—Ramsey Denton—the one who was lost on the *Queen Bee*."

Spender turned away, bent down, and closed the suitcase. "Oh yes—Denton." But his mood and tone had changed.

"I remember how I cried when the report came back—cried for you," Cassie said. "Then—when they found you on that asteroid—a million to one chance—"

"Uh-huh. But that's all over now. This space boat of yours—where is it?"

"Down at the port."

"How would you like to hop over to St. Louis?"

"St. Louis? Why do you want to go there?"

"I'll tell you on the way." Spender kicked the suitcase under the bed. Then he paused. "Maybe I'll need those old clothes," he muttered. He bent down and retrieved the suitcase and retied the cord. "Let's go."

As he opened the door, his eye caught the bottle lying on the bed. "Wait a minute." He picked up the bottle and opened it. He poured a drink into the glass on the stand

and handed it to Cassie. He held the bottle aloft. "Toast," he said.

Cassie raised her glass. "A toast to what?"

"To destruction," Spender said, and tipped the bottle to his lips.

Cassie said, "An odd toast, but I'll drink to it if you say so." She emptied the glass.

Spender corked the bottle and set it behind a section of broken wall behind the bed. "For the next unfortunate," he said.

"But how will he find it there?"

"A drunk, honey, can find a bottle anywhere within half a mile. It's an instinct they develop. Let's go."

"Man!" Spender said, an hour later. "They're sure building them these days. This boat could almost make the Jupiter run, and they call it a pleasure cruiser!"

"It carries Out-Belt restrictions," Cassie said, "but Uncle Will told me the same thing."

"He's the one who gave it to you?"

"Yes, but it wasn't a present exactly. You see Dad sold out Marno Limited after the *Queen Bee* was lost. Then, six months later, he died."

"I remember," Spender

said a trifle bitterly. "I heard about it but I didn't go to the funeral. I was drunk at the time."

"Dad left everything to me and Uncle Will handles my money. It's very good of him. I don't know the first thing about money. When I want anything, I tell him. I asked him for a ship and recommended this one."

"He doesn't worry about your running around alone in it?"

"There isn't any danger. It has the new Mono-Robot control. You couldn't crash it if you wanted to."

"Things have changed a lot in two years," Spender muttered. "The last time I was in space, you could crash them without half-trying."

Twenty minutes after take-off, Cassie said, "You were going to tell me what this is all about; why we're going to St. Louis."

"No time, now," Spender grinned. "We're almost there. I'll tell you later."

But after dropping down onto a blast pit in the Mississippi port, Spender left the ship and strode swiftly to the port hostel where he signed for two rooms. Cassie followed him. He'd brought the battered suitcase with him, and

the clerk looked at it with suspicion. But no room clerk ever born could stand in the way of Spender Kelly when he wanted something. He sent Cassie to her room and went to his own. Ten minutes later, he appeared at her door looking pretty much as he had when Cassie had found him in the Arizona flop house. He had no beard now, but it had been replaced with smears of dirt he'd gotten off the outer window sill in his room.

Cassie gasped. "Good heavens! Here we go again."

Spender grinned. "Not exactly, hon. I've got a little job to do. I want you to wait here for me. Won't be gone long but I'll have to hurry. It's getting late."

"Where are you going?"

"A place called Wentworth Enterprises."

"Why?"

"I understand they're hiring labor for work in deep space."

"Spender! You're not going to—"

"Leave you? Not right now. I'll be back."

"But why are you going to this place?"

"To get track of a man who calls himself Wentworth."

"But—"

"No time, now, honey. Wait for me."

He went out and got into a cab.

The cab stopped in front of a long low building that had obviously been thrown up as a temporary shelter. Even though the sun had just dipped out of sight, there was still a line of men moving slowly into the place.

The cab driver turned and said, "This is it. Some planetary building project I understand. Are you going to sign on, Mister?"

"Maybe," Spender said and left the cab and moved in long strides toward the building.

Spender Kelly realized that what he contemplated was murder in the eyes of the law, but he gave that fact scarcely a thought. In his own mind, he was an executioner.

He approached the doorway and stepped to the end of the line. The man ahead of Spender, was a tall, sad-faced individual with a sallow complexion. He turned and said, "You signing on?"

"No," Spender said, "I've got a date with the Secretary of Space-Commerce. I'm meeting him here."

The sallow man wasn't offended. If anything, he grew more sad. "That's good. Real funny. A joke. Me—I just hope they'll take me on. Got

me a touch of lung rot on Mars last year, building the Cross-Pole Tunnel, and it kind of puts me on the sidelines. I understand this outfit ain't too particular, though. They seem to be taking anybody that can walk."

"Where's the project?"

The other shrugged. "Nobody seems to know exactly. They give out a satellite location in Leo I think, but that don't mean nothing."

"What kind of work?"

"Construction it looks like."

The line had moved into the building now, and Spender's eyes were busy. The interior was bare except for a table at the far end toward which the line stretched. The flimsiest sort of a temporary hiring hall. There were two men seated at the table before which the applicants stood. Two others stood behind them; hard looking, stiff faced men who were obviously something other than construction men. Denton was nowhere in sight. Spender felt a keen disappointment. However, he asked himself, how much luck had he expected? Walking straight to Denton was, after all, a lot to hope for.

The line moved swiftly, each man being handled with dispatch. So far as Spender

could see, none were rejected. This in itself, was off-key. On an average, one man in thirty had been found capable of functioning under conditions found beyond the earth's surface. Industrial labor tables said so, and they were put together by scientists who knew their business. But here, man after man was being signed up with no physical examination whatever.

Now it was Spender's turn. He shuffled to a halt in front of the table, put a hang-dog expression on his face and stared sullenly at his feet. The young man taking down information, eyed him with cold impersonality. "Name?"

"William Henderson."

"Age?"

"Thirty-one."

"Had any construction experience?"

"Lots of it."

"In space?"

"No—all earthside, but—"

"That's all right. Want to work in space?"

"What planet?"

"Does it matter? One's the same as the other."

The young man uttered this falsehood with a casual wave of his hand and said, "Twenty-five dollars a day from blast-off to return. Three-year stretch."

So that was how they were

hooking them, Spender thought. Ten dollars a day was rated as high. Fifteen exorbitant. Therefore, men didn't inquire too deeply when offered twenty-five.

"Well, what about it? We haven't got all night."

"I'll take it," Spender said. Anything to gain time.

"Sign here."

Spender took the pen and was bending over the table when a sharp voice said, "Just a minute."

Spender tensed. He knew that voice. He turned. Ramsey Denton stood facing him. Denton hadn't changed much, except the mask of sincerity had been discarded. There was a grim arrogance in his face now. He was flanked by three men—evidently bodyguards. He said, "What are you made up for, Spender? A masquerade party?"

Spender stared at Denton, mumbled, "What you talking about? My name ain't—ain't what you said. I'm just a guy down on his luck, looking for a job."

"You've no idea how far down on your luck you are, Spender. You've come to the end of your string."

"I don't get you, Mister. You keep calling me—"

"You're a dead man, Spender."

Denton had stepped forward to keep his voice from carrying. He moved within Spender's reach, and Spender knew further masquerading was a waste of time. Nothing was left but a try at the suicide run.

He dived at Denton and caught him by the wrist. He turned under the wrist swiftly, bringing Denton to his knees. He moved in to lock his knee under Denton's chin and exert the necessary pressure. With a few second's leeway, he knew he could break Denton's neck. He'd seen it done by Martian *hongo* experts and had studied the technique.

But Denton and his bodyguards were on the alert. Within a scant moment of success, Spender felt the impact of a fist driven in behind his right ear. The point of a boot caught him in the groin and his hold was broken. He slumped to the floor with darkness closing around him. He didn't go completely out, however, and as his head cleared, he saw Denton standing well away from him. Denton was rubbing his neck and speaking to the three bodyguards who held Spender to the floor.

"This man is a maniac,"

Denton said in a loud voice. "Take him to the police station immediately." The three men hauled Spender out of the building. Denton followed.

Outside, Denton's act for the benefit of onlookers was dropped. He looked at the sagging Spender and said, "That was as stupid a trick as I ever saw. Did you think I wouldn't recognize you?"

Spender mumbled curses and allowed his weight to hang on the two men who held him.

"I made a mistake, not killing you on the *Queen Bee*," Denton said. "Along with the rest. But I have a touch of sentimental weakness sometimes. Foolish of me. I thought maybe you'd have sense enough to stay away from me and thus stay alive. Evidently you haven't. Now you're through."

Spender cursed some more—hung with his knees bent, his head lolling. Denton stepped forward and hit him in the face. There was no particular savageness behind the blow. It was more of a contemptuous gesture. Denton said, "You've got two hours to dispose of him. We're taking on the last few men and then we'll blast off. Be back in time or we'll leave you."

He turned and walked back to the building.

One of the men got behind the wheel of the car while the other two dumped Spender on the floor in back. They got in after him and sat down, using Spender's body for a footrest. They said nothing.

The car circled the space port and turned in the direction of the river. If they went all the way, Spender knew he had about fifteen minutes. Obviously they intended to kill him and throw him in the water. There was nothing to do but wait.

The car stopped and one of the men got out. "This'll do," he said. The second man followed, grinding his heel into Spender's back. As he stepped from the car, one foot on the ground, Spender was ready. He took the man by the ankle and twisted, bracing his feet against the far door for leverage. The man pivoted, lost his footing and screamed as his leg broke near the hip joint. The first man turned in surprise but he was too slow. Spender catapulted from the car and brought him down with a flying tackle. He rolled instantly in order to bring the man's body between himself and the driver, using him as a shield while he broke his

neck with a single twist of his hands. Either surprise or lack of defensive knowledge against *hongo* sent the man to quick death.

The driver was out of the car now, and charging around the rear. He had a gun in his hand and Spender had no place to go; no place except straight into the gun. He charged, set for the slug's impact. The gun snarled and flamed and Spender had his hands on the driver. He shoved a knee between the man's thighs and got leverage on his neck in the same motion. Bone snapped. But the gun snarled again—the desperate action of a dying man—and Spender went down under the smash of a descending hammer.

Spender drifted back to consciousness. He moved his head and a wave of sharp pain cleared his mind. A voice said, "Careful, darling. Don't move," and Spender opened his eyes to see Cassie bending over him.

He blinked and recognized the hostel room he'd taken at the port. "How in hell did I get here?" he muttered. He raised his arm and looked at his watch, then dropped the arm in a hopeless gesture.

Cassie was stroking the

bandage on his head. "I followed you. I was afraid you would get in trouble when you left, so I tagged along and saw the men put you in the car. I followed them but I lost them for a while and when I got to the river I thought all four of you were dead. I hauled you into the car and brought you back here."

Spender looked around. "No cops?"

"I didn't call the police. I was afraid they would arrest you."

Spender reached over and took her hand. "Cassie, what would I do without you? Every move I make puts me deeper in hock to you. How will I ever get out?"

"Do you want to get out?" she asked softly.

"But I'm no damned good, baby. I've flunked again. I walked in wide open and got slapped down. I went in to kill Denton and I didn't even inconvenience him. I'm a washout."

"Did you kill those three men?"

Spender closed his eyes. "If they were dead I guess I killed them. They were Denton's shock troops. He told them to get rid of me."

"Then you acted in self defense. I'm glad."

"You thought I'd just killed them to be doing something?"

"I didn't know what to think."

"But you covered for me."

"I'd have done that anyhow. But I'm glad you killed in self defense."

"That's not much credit. I went to that place to murder a man."

"You were going to tell me what's behind all this."

Spender lay back and looked bleakly at the ceiling. "That's right, but I never got the time, did I?"

"No."

He grinned without humor. "Well, I guess I've got plenty of time now that I've messed it up. I've got all the time there is."

"Then tell me."

"I was captain of the *Queen Bee* as you remember, with Denton my second in command. Denton was my best friend. That shows how stupid I was. Since long before the *Queen Bee* flight, he'd been planning something—something he needed the ship for. Halfway out, he struck."

"I thought the ship was hit by a meteor."

"That was what I told them, but it wasn't true. Denton walked into the ward room one day and murdered seven men—the officers who

weren't in his confidence. He walked in and blasted them into ashes before they could move."

Cassie stared at Spender as though she couldn't conceive such a thing. "Then the *Queen Bee* wasn't lost?"

"Of course not."

"Why didn't you tell the police all this when they found you on the asteroid?"

Spender passed a weary hand over his face. "Because I swore to get him myself. I had visions of Denton twisting out of it some way. And even if he was convicted I was afraid some clever space lawyer would get him off with a prison term and if he landed in jail I wouldn't be able to get at him."

"Then you've been hunting him for two years?"

"Not exactly, hon," Spender smiled and the smile was full of self-recrimination. "I started out like an avenging fire—hired detectives to locate him. But he was smart—he stayed out of sight—and I began to think that possibly the ship *had* blown up after he marooned me on the asteroid. I sensed my own failure and began to see visions of those seven men dying—men I could have saved."

"That's absurd. You didn't

know. How could you have saved them?"

"I didn't tell you all of it—exactly what happened. You see, Denton came down the second-deck alleyway that led to the ward room with the gun in his hand. He opened the door to the ward room and at that moment I came out of the control cabin and stood not ten feet from him when he raised the gun to start firing. I—I didn't stop him."

"It would have been impossible!"

"That isn't true. I was scared, Cassie. For five or ten seconds—the crucial seconds—I stood there frozen with fear."

"Not fear, darling. Surprise. You were never afraid of anything."

"I was scared stiff. I saw the possibility of that gun being turned on me and I couldn't move."

"I still say it was surprise. The shock of realizing what Denton was really like."

"It was cowardice, baby. Only ten seconds of it maybe—but that ten seconds meant death for seven innocent men. I began seeing their faces in my dreams. I began drinking to chase the faces away—"

"Why didn't Denton kill you?"

"I don't know. He probably figured I was as good as dead if he marooned me. I think he just wanted me to die harder than the others."

There was a moment of silence while Spender stared at the ceiling. Then Cassie said, "Don't you think you ought to tell the police now, Darling?"

Spender did not seem to hear. "I've got a hunch," he said, "that Denton is swinging a big deal of some kind. He must have hired a thousand men. That's a lot of men for space work."

"A ship blasted off an hour ago. Maybe it was his."

"It was. I heard him say he was leaving in two hours. That was back at the hiring hall."

"Why don't you tell the police what you know and give it up. Let them take over? You need a rest. A long rest."

Suddenly Spender came erect. "Wait a minute! With all those men, he couldn't have used a fast ship."

Cassie's eyes widened. "No! If you're thinking what I—"

"Baby, your cruiser could overtake anything in the B class, and he's got to be using a freighter."

"But it's absurd, Spender. If you did overtake Denton

in space, what could you do? My cruiser isn't armed."

Spender was up from the bed, reaching for his tunic. "You're right, hon, but there's something I've got to do. Wait for me here. I'll be back."

"But you're not able—"

He grinned. "I'm plenty able. You just sit tight." He took her in his arms and kissed her; not a hurried kiss, but one with something in it to remember. When he drew back, Cassie blinked. "*Mister Kelly!* You wouldn't fool a poor girl, would you?"

"Not a chance."

"When will you be back?"

"Two hours at the most."

Spender kissed her again, and left. As he hurried out through the lobby of the hostel, he felt a definite sense of guilt. But he put it resolutely aside. He would settle with Cassie later. In the meantime, nothing was going to stand in his way. Cassie would be sure to understand—he hoped.

He ordered supplies at the port, paying a premium rate for immediate delivery. He saw the gear stowed aboard and headed for Control. A smooth-cheeked career lad waited to be of service, his hair neatly brushed, his uniform spotless.

"What ship went out last?" Spender asked.

The youth looked at his schedule. "The *Centaur*. An hour and ten minutes ago."

"Where was it bound for?"

"What is your reason for asking?"

"No reason. Just curiosity. I saw the blast and figured it was a pretty big ship."

"It was. A freighter. But I can't give you its course unless you're inquiring in an official capacity."

Spender shrugged. "Just curiosity—as I said. I want clearance for the cruiser on Number Nine ramp."

The young man consulted his chart. "The *Magnolia*? You've only been in four hours. Has it been serviced?"

"They're just finishing up."

The young man pulled a form out of the chart. "Did you sign her in?"

"That's right. I'm the pilot."

"Sign here, please."

Spender signed, forcing himself to do it casually.

"I'll have to have the co-pilot's signature too."

"We don't carry one. It's an automatic job. Mono-robot."

The young man checked the classification. "Oh, I see. Very well. I'll signal the tower.

Check with them when you're ready to blast."

Spender whistled a lazy tune as he left the office. Once outside he stopped whistling and headed for the cruiser at a dead run.

Twenty minutes later he was in space. He grinned.

Then the grin froze as a voice hit his ear. "Will you have a cup of coffee?"

He whirled. Cassie Marno was standing behind him with a tray.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Spender barked.

"It's fresh and hot," Cassie said. "I just made it."

Spender eyed her with beligerence. "We're not going back, Cassie. I'm not giving up this last chance."

"I'm not asking you to. I'm just sore at you for trying to get away from me."

He turned suddenly and walked to where she was standing. He put his hands on her shoulders. "Baby, you're here and that's that. I hope you won't regret it."

"All right. Now that we've settled that, how about telling me what you have in mind by way of a plan."

"First, we've got to locate Denton's freighter."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

Spender's grin was mirthless. "Wait about forty-eight hours, and I'll show you."

And the next day she had another question for Spender. "I wish you'd tell me exactly what you intend to do even if you find Denton. All I can figure, is that you'll be killed."

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. I know I can't do anything until I do find him, so I'll concentrate on that first."

Cassie flared in anger. "Spender, you can be the most aggravating man! Haven't I done enough to prove—"

"—That I can't get along without you? You certainly have, baby. And some day I'll make it all up to you." He took her in his arms and kissed her. This diverted her mind.

The following day, Cassie came into the control room to hear Spender calling out the position of the ship over the radio transmitter. He repeated it three times. Then his, "Come in, please," brought a response from a far-off Asteroid Scout Station: "Taurus Blue Five, here. Over."

"Distress call," Spender said. "The cruiser *Magnolia* drifting off-course with dead tube. Is there any help in this sector?"

"Hold on. Will check."

Three minutes later the thin voice came over again. "Freighter, *Alaskan Lord* on far side of sector. You could probably contact."

"Fine. Have you got its wave-length?"

A few moments later, Spender grinned in triumph. He wrote the wave down in micro-cycles, and said, "Thanks a lot. We'll make out."

"If you don't locate them, report back on the universal band."

"Will do. Thanks. Out."

Spender turned to Cassie. "You wanted to know how I'd locate Denton? This is it. Watch." He turned to the radio and set the dials. A faint *beep* came through. He adjusted the dials and it grew louder. "We keep right after him on his radio beam until we get a *blip* on the radar screen. Then we've got him."

Cassie sighed. "You mean then he's got you. Why don't you call for help, Spender? Why must you do everything yourself?"

"It's my job," Spender said, grimly. "He's got to answer to me."

Cassie knew, by now, the futility of arguing. She gestured in despair and went out to make coffee.

For indistinguishable days and nights, they hung grimly on the radio *beep*. Spender took the long shifts, and Cassie filled in when he had to have sleep. But no dot appeared on the radarscope and Spender became more morose by the hour. "We should be on him now. A freighter can't be that fast."

"Maybe it's equipped with special tubes," Cassie suggested.

"Even so, with the men and equipment he must be carrying—"

"But why be so impatient? As long as you're on his beam, you've got to make contact—unless he keeps on traveling forever."

"We'll get him."

"You need some sleep. I'll take over."

Spender stretched out on the cot and Cassie took his seat at the radarscope. The monotonous *beep-beep, beep-beep* from the radio beam filled the cabin. But save for erratic meteorite material, the scope remained clear.

Spender turned and twisted on the cot until Cassie looked his way. "Can't you sleep?"

"Afraid not. Guess I've been getting too much sleep."

"That's a laugh."

"You know—I've got a feeling this deal of Denton's

is bigger than anything we've got the least idea of."

"Do you think it's illegal?"

"I think anything Denton is involved in would be legal."

"It's obviously construction work and this is free territory. I can't think of any such work that *could* be against the law out here."

"Denton is clever. He plays for big stakes. During the Polaris Wars, he took Hellot stronghold without losing a man."

"They were the green non-conformists, weren't they?"

"Right. They had a few good scientists and they put a ray barricade together that no one could pierce."

"Denton conquered them?"

"Uh-huh. With one of the oldest tricks in the world. A trick he borrowed from the ancients. He built a huge plastic horse. Five tons of red horse that held the green men spellbound while he lowered it from a ship right into the middle of their camp. I guess they thought it was a gift or something, but they stood there flat footed while he opened the horse and cut the resistance right out of them. He got a citation."

Cassie shuddered. "It sounds terribly cruel."

"It was, but it won the war."

"I wonder why he stole the *Queen Bee*."

"I think it was only a part of his plan. I doubt if it's the only ship he got his hands on."

"But where could his money have come from? It costs plenty to finance a project that takes all the men he hired."

Spender yawned. "Maybe he found an angel. A beautiful angel like you. Anybody with your kind of money could finance a pretty big deal."

"Who'd be so foolish?"

"How much money *have* you got, Cassie?"

"I don't know. I leave all that to Uncle Will." Cassie moved a dial and the volume of the *beep* increased. "Why don't you try to get some sleep?"

"Okay."

But Spender had scarcely dozed off when Cassie was shaking his shoulder. "Wake up, darling! Something's happening. The scope's active!"

Spender bounded to his feet and leaped across the cabin to the scope. A *blip* glowed in blue on the round, curved screen. Spender's eyes lighted. "We made it!" he cried.

But Cassie's face wore a puzzled expression. "Yes, but it looks—"

Spender frowned. "What the hell! That's not a ship!"

"That's what I meant. It's far too positive."

"It's an asteroid at the very least. A big one. Or maybe a satellite."

"I think so."

"But what's an asteroid doing with a radio wave?"

"Maybe—"

"I get it!" Spender said. "There's a receiving station on the satellite and it operates on the same wave length as the ship we've been following. The ship brought us into its port."

Cassie showed dismay. "Then we're too late."

"Not by a long shot!" Spender said, grimly. "We've got to get some photos. Can you operate the camera?"

"I don't know."

"There's nothing to it. I'll set the range and we'll go in on the dark side and use infra-red. We'll have to stay far enough away to make them think we're meteorite material until we get the set-up."

Spender crossed to the opposite side of the cabin and cleared the photo port. He threw the switch that brought the camera up from its crib

and then set the finder. "I'm putting it at fifteen hundred miles. I'll ease the ship in under manual and give you the word to hit the switch."

Thirty seven minutes later, Spender said, "Now!" and the infra-red film began winding behind the telescopic eye of the camera. And ten minutes after that, they were looking at the negatives on the pilot cabin screen.

"Good heavens! What's going on down there?" Cassie exclaimed.

The picture revealed was one of great activity. The body upon which this activity was taking place was a good hundred miles in diameter, Spender estimated, and was obviously equipped with an artificial gravity core because the figures moving about wore only light resistance suits and oxygen globes.

There were three huge construction projects in process and at least five thousand workers swarmed like ants over the satellite. There was a space port and a cluster of buildings from which all the action appeared to stem.

"What are they doing?" Cassie asked.

"I wish I knew," Spender replied. "But at least this answers a lot of questions—and poses plenty of new ones."

"What do you mean?"

"The ship we were following didn't bring Denton's first load of workers. He was only adding to his force—or filling in the gaps."

"You mean they keep quitting?"

Spender's grin was bleak. "Not voluntarily. Look." He pointed to a some of the figures on the screen. "Those men are guards. There are several hundred of them scattered through the ranks. They're heavily armed and watching for trouble."

"Why that adds up to—"

"—To slave labor," Spender said, grimly. "And another thing. See those pits and low buildings just there?"

"Yes. What are they?"

"Cremation ovens—chemical tanks—for disposing of dead bodies. Those workman are the scum of earth. Denton takes any man willing to come and that point had me puzzled. Now I see why. He works them until they drop dead and then brings in a new bunch to fill the gaps. Cheap that way. He doesn't have to pay them."

"Spender! It—it makes me sick to even think of it."

"But at least you know now what kind of a man we're dealing with. Denton is carrying some plan forward and

he won't let even hell itself stop him. Look!"

At that moment a truck lumbered into camera range. It moved toward the cremation ovens. It stopped and several men got out and climbed into the back and began throwing objects onto a moving belt that ran into the one of the buildings.

Cassie gripped Spender's arm and turned pale. "Spender!" she gasped. "Those—those things are—dead bodies!"

"The afternoon load, I presume," Spender said through set teeth. "Don't look, Cassie. It will make you sick."

She smiled wanly and turned away. "I guess I *have* seen enough."

Spender continued to stare at the unreeling film. "But what in damnation is he *doing*? What are those projects? They're not far enough along yet to show anything definite, and yet—" He turned suddenly away from the screen. "I've got to go down there, Cassie. I've got to find out what's going on."

"Spender! No! I won't let you."

He hardly heard her. He was studying the clock and making mental computations. "There's approximately a

two-and-a-half-hours of night down there. And I've got about an hour and a half to go down and meet it. I can make it if I hurry." He ran from the pilot cabin and Cassie followed him.

She was still protesting when he fastened the last buckle on his light resistance suit and picked up the plastic oxygen globe. But Spender paid no attention until he had need of her to help with the escape hatch. Then he turned and grinned and took her in his arms. "Now take it easy, honey. Nothing's going to happen to me. I'm not going to get in any trouble. I'm just going down to look around."

She eyed him with anxiety. "Promise me that you won't try to kill Denton. Not yet. If you go lumbering in, you'll be killed sure."

"I promise. And I won't get in trouble. I've got this." He patted the holster at his side in which nestled the latest thing in controlled heat tubes. "I can cut a man in two with this."

"When will you be back?"

"Five hours at the latest. And when I come back, I'll have a plan. Keep the ship circling in this orbit so I can pick it up without trouble."

"I know I can't stop you, Spender, so I guess the least

I can do is send you off with my prayer."

"Good girl. What would I do without you . . ."

Five minutes later, he was hurtling through darkness toward the mystery satellite.

Spender came down gently on a smooth rock surface behind the cremation ovens. He dropped and lay flat for several minutes until he was sure no one was coming to investigate. Then he moved toward the group of buildings he and Cassie had spotted on the infra-red film. As he passed the crematorium, an opportunity presented itself and he was not slow to take advantage of it. An armed guard came slowly around the corner, holding his short, ugly spray gun in one hand while he adjusted his oxygen flow with the other. He saw Spender and scowled. He was in the act of barking out a challenge when Spender hit him—squarely in the belly with the toe of a heavy boot swung with the whole weight of his body behind it. The guard gagged and his eyes bulged as he doubled over in agony. He pitched forward to his knees and Spender's foot came down on the back of his helmet, smashing the contorted face to the ground. Spender

der grabbed the falling gun and then threw the weight of his body on the foot, smashing the guard's helmet. The man writhed over on his back, gasping now—dying from lack of oxygen. Spender did not wait for this process to bring death. As he would smash a bug, he brought the heavy butt of the gun down on the man's skull, crushing it. As brutal as the act was, it was still a more merciful death than the other.

Spender pushed the body against the wall and waited to see if the incident had been noted by anyone in the vicinity. No voice came out of the semi-darkness to challenge him, so he picked up the guard's body and carried it around to the moving belt. He dropped it in the chute and it disappeared from sight.

Now he was in a better tactical position. He carried a gun and could possibly pass for a guard. The solo-jet unit he wore was small and inconspicuous and was entirely invisible to anyone approaching him from the front.

He put the gun under his arm and moved toward what appeared to be the administration building. It was dark except for three lighted windows along its twenty-window length. A guard lounged

by the door, leaning against the wall, his gun hanging lazily in the crook of his arm. Spender, alert without appearing to be, moved slowly toward him. As he emerged from the gloom, the guard turned his head. "Boring night," Spender said, casually.

"You said it." The guard yawned. "Wish I could duck inside for a smoke."

"The boss around?" Spender asked.

The guard yawned. "Uh-uh. He went spaceside about an hour ago. Man! I'd like a cigarette."

"Me too," Spender said. "Tell you what. Let's spell each other. You duck inside and grab one. Then it's my turn."

The guard didn't hesitate long. "All right. Keep your eye out. I'll rush it."

Standing alone by the door, Spender studied the contour of the closest construction project. Even in this early stage, there was something familiar about it. He scowled, telling himself he should know what it was. What could Denton be building, with slave labor, here on this bleak, lonely lump of rock? And who would finance such a project? Big money was involved and big money always wanted a

sure return. Some mining project? A new and cheaper way of refining metal? Spender puzzled over the problem until the guard returned.

"All right, chum. It's your turn. Make it fast, though, will you?"

Spender hurried through the door while the guard covered the area with his eyes. Once inside, Spender moved through the first door available. A long room stretched away in front of him, and even in the dim light, he knew what went on here. A vast chemistry lab. Chemistry. Did that strengthen his theory on mining? Possibly; possibly not. He walked through the room and out the other end. A hallway, with doors giving off on either side. This looked like living quarters.

Spender tried two doors and found them locked. The third one opened. A light was on but the room was deserted. Spender looked swiftly about. There was expensive luggage at the foot of the bed; a gold comb and brush set on the table. He bent down to look for a name on one of the suitcases. He found a name.

It took a great deal to shock Spender Kelly, but he bent over the suitcase for a long time, unable to believe what

he saw. His first clear thought was: *How will I tell Cassie?*

He straightened and turned toward the door, and the second revelation came as he was returning to the entrance of the building through the long room filled with drafting tables. A blue-print caught his eye. He picked it up and carried it to the window for better light. What he saw froze him to the spot. Not a blue-print but a sketch, probably done before the project had been started. A sketch of the huge satellite with three spires protruding from it in strategic arrangement. Spender knew what they were.

Jet tubes.

Spender's mind worked swiftly and he did a complete about-face in his planning. If his new hunch on Denton's plan was any where near accurate, the destruction of Denton was too big a job to be entrusted to one man. The risk of failure was too great. It was no longer a matter of stopping one man. It was a matter of stopping absolute catastrophe. The magnitude of the revelations appalled Spender, experienced though he was. *No star is safe*, he thought, *no world is beyond his reach*.

Spender knew he had to get

back to the *Magnolia* quickly. He went back to the entrance and looked out. The guard was alone. As he went out the door, he made the mistake of turning for a backward glance. Instantly, the guard's voice came in over his helmet speaker. "What's that thing you've got on your back?"

Spender turned to conceal it. "What thing?"

"Oh, sure. A jet unit. Say! What the hell are you doing with—?"

These were the last words he ever spoke. Spender's small ray gun was out and spitting. It cut a thin, white-hot line across the guard's chest, slicing his life away. As he dropped to the ground, Spender was already adjusting his controls. He shot away from the satellite with a force that tore at his joints and strained every ligament in his body. As he moved toward the *Magnolia's* orbit he looked back at the asteroid. It was more than that, now. It was a sinister threat to all humanity.

He strained the unit to its uttermost, racing toward the *Magnolia*, and in a short time, the outline of the ship loomed ahead. He adjusted a dial on his helmet and called Cassie. There was no reply, but as he

arced in, the escape hatch slid open and he broke in.

The hatch closed and he removed his helmet, he heard the hiss of oxygen filling the hatch. He stripped off his suit while waiting for the inner door to release. It moved away from the circular opening and he stepped through into the ship.

As he did so, a sharp object was pressed into his back and a voice grated in his ear, "All right, Spender. Don't move or I'll cut you in two."

He cursed himself for blundering in. Another mistake in a long line of mistakes. He should have realized Denton could conceivably have spotted the *Magnolia* on radar as a ship rather than meteorite material.

The scene was stark before him. Cassie tied to a chair with one of Denton's bodyguards standing close by. Denton himself holding the gun in Spender's back.

Denton came slowly around to face Spender. Denton now held two guns; his own and the one he'd lifted from Spender's holster. He said, "You're beyond doubt the most persistent fool I ever met, Spender. You keep popping up with the persistence of a moth around a light tube.

Evertime I meet you I'm in a position to kill you. You're stupid, Spender."

There was a band of adhesive around Cassie's mouth. Above it her wide eyes pleaded with Spender. He said, "Take that gag off Cassie, Denton, or I'll make a try for the gun in your hand. And maybe I'd win."

"You're an idiot," Denton snapped, "but there's no further need of the gag. I used it so she wouldn't warn you over the radio." Denton motioned to the guard. "Take it off."

As soon as her voice was free, Cassie said, "I'm sorry, Spender. He tricked me into opening the port. He—"

Denton waved an impatient hand. "That isn't important. The important thing is what I'm going to do with you." He was looking at Cassie as he spoke.

Spender said, "Go ahead and kill me, Denton. But give Cassie a break. She isn't involved in this. It was all my idea."

"On the contrary—she's very much involved. She presents a problem." He turned his attention to Spender, now. "Did you enjoy yourself, gumshoeing around my satellite?"

Spender clenched his fists. "What are you trying to get

away with down there, Denton?"

Denton smiled. "Obviously you are too stupid to find out for yourself, and I see no reason to enlighten you."

"Then I'll tell you. You're putting three jets into that rock pile. When you're finished, it will be a weapon—the largest projectile ever devised. With the jets you can steer it anywhere you want to. If you aim it at Earth, you can slow it up and ease it through the atmosphere so it won't burn up. Then you can pick up enough speed in an orbit to crack Earth wide open—smash it completely."

Denton continued to smile. "You're smarter than I thought you were. I didn't think you'd be able to figure it out. But you're right. You've outlined the potentials of the project perfectly. It will never be used, however."

"You're trying to imply that you have human instincts?"

"Not in the sense you mean. But I have no intention of splitting any planets. I'm merely using the projectile as a threat to back up an ultimatum. Earth will capitulate, of course. They'd be foolish not to. I merely intend to take them over—not destroy them."

Spender took a deep breath and judged the distance to Denton's gun. "This deal cost you a lot of money."

Denton's eyes flicked to Cassie, and Spender knew what went through his mind—why he considered her a problem. At that moment, the radio crackled and a muffled voice came through. Denton motioned to the guard. "Work the hatch for a boarder," he said. There was a frown on his face, and while he was on the alert for any movement from Spender, it was easy to see that his mind was otherwise occupied. While the guard waited for the oxygen to fill the escape hatch, Denton said, "I think you'd better take her into another room—hide her." He nodded toward Cassie. Then, as the guards approached her, he changed his mind. "No. Leave her where she is. The issue must be faced squarely."

Then the guard threw the switch, the door opened, and a man entered the ship. He had already stripped off his helmet. For a moment there was silence. Then Cassie cried, "Uncle Will!"

He was a short, stout man and upon his face was a mixed expression of bewilderment and sullenness. And in the set

of his eyes and the cut of his mouth, there was inherent greed. He turned accusingly on Denton. "What is this? You didn't tell me, she was here. What are you trying to do?"

Denton eyed the man with a mixture of calculation and contempt. "I saw no reason for hiding her from you. After all, maybe the girl has a right to know where her money went."

Cassie was stunned. "Uncle Will! You've been financing this—this criminal with *my* money."

William Marno decided to brazen it through. "It's over and done with, Cassie. The die is cast. There's nothing you can do about it."

Denton was looking at Spender Kelly. "You don't seem surprised."

"I'm not. I found Marno's room down in your building. I found his name on a suitcase."

Denton shrugged. "Well, it doesn't matter." He turned to the fat man. "The important thing is this, Marno. They've both got to die."

Marno's mouth opened in consternation. "Cassie? You're going to kill Cassie? Why should you do that?"

"We've come to the point where we can no longer take

chances. If we were ready to move, it would be different, but we've still got several month's work here. A woman on a satellite with several thousand men is too great a danger.

"She knew nothing about all this!" Spender cried.

"That's beside the point. She knows now. She dies when you die."

The guard shoved his gun hard into Spender's back. "Don't make any silly moves, mister."

Spender's fists tightened as Denton said, "In a few months, we'll have the jets finished. They will turn this asteroid into a projectile, just as you surmised. Using it as a threat, I can take over any planet I wish to. I'll start with Earth."

Will Marno said, "But why should Cassie have to die? Can't we keep her isolated?"

Denton looked at him sternly. "Marno, I'm the leader of this project. My word is law. I'll have no interference. My judgment is final."

Marno's shoulders sagged. "I suppose you know best."

"All right," Denton snapped, turning to the guard. "Marno and I will leave. After we're gone, kill the girl and Kelly. Then set

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the automatic to take this ship into far outer space and follow us. Report to me in my office."

Then Will Marno, moving swiftly for a man of his build, dove at the guard, twisted the gun around, and pressed the guard's own finger down on the switch. The guard died instantly with a look of only faint amazement on his face.

Spender leaped forward and was upon Denton before the latter knew quite what was happening.

Will Marno stared at the crumpling guard, seemingly appalled at what he'd done.

He said, "Denton, I'm—I couldn't let you kill her. If you hadn't said she had to die, everything would have been all right. But I couldn't let you kill her."

Spender said, "Cut Cassie loose, Mr. Marno, and take her out into the escape lock."

Marno stared at Spender for a moment, seemingly dazed. Then he walked to Cassie's chair and began loosening her bonds.

"Stop it you fool!" Denton yelled. "Do as I told you."

Marno helped Cassie to her feet. "Come," he said.

Denton's eyes widened. His nostrils flared. "Come back! You're not going to leave me at the mercy of this madman! He'll kill me—kill me—"

The escape hatch closed and Denton and Spender were alone in the cabin with the body of the dead guard. Denton cringed. "Spender—now listen. We can make a deal. You and I, Spender. We'd make a great team. We could rule the universe!"

Spender threw Denton across the room, twisting him as he did so. Denton screamed as he flew through the air. He hit the wall and fell to the floor with his arm twisted at a grotesque angle. "You broke it!" he bab-

bled. "You broke my arm!"

Spender moved across the cabin toward him. Denton cringed. "I can't stand pain, Spender! Please! I can't stand pain!"

Five minutes later, the shrieking, babbling Denton was finally dead.

A week later, Spender and Cassie stood beside the main building on the asteroid looking up into the sky. A fleet of government ships hovered there, and a small pilot shell was bringing the commander down to take over.

But Cassie and Spender had their eyes trained in another direction—off to the left, where a faint dot was vanishing into space. It was the *Magnolia* with a single passenger aboard—William Marno.

Cassie said, "Thank you for letting him escape, darling. Somehow I just couldn't—"

Spender pressed her hand. "It's all right, Cassie. He wasn't a bad guy in comparison to Denton. And we'll never see him again."

Tears came into Cassie's eyes. "Darling—why do things have to be—like they are?"

He kissed her and she was content.

(Continued from
Back Cover)



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